



The Vanishing Act Affair
magazine cover

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June 1966

Volume 1, Issue 5

Misshapen, monster-like, they crouched deep under London and listened to their demoniac leader: "You will take over the Earth after tonight—after the whole men die. For nothing—not even the creatures from U.N.C.L.E.—can stop me from decreeing the end of the world!"

Somewhere deep under London, a misshapen monster had decreed the end of the world. Only two men, Illya and Solo, might stop him—and time was running out too fast!

[Act I: To See Or Not To See](#)

[Act II: Come Kill With Me](#)

[Act III: The Last Shall Be First](#)

[Act IV: Not With A Bang But A Scream](#)

ACT I—TO SEE OR NOT TO SEE

THE MAN limped across the open space between the wooded hills and the armored truck.

A grotesque figure in the twilight—short, heavy, with a twisted leg and thick, shaggy hair that hung down almost to his eyes in front, below his neck in back.

The armored truck, closed and buttoned up, its last pick-up of the day made, started its engine. The loading dock was now deserted, the floodlights out, all personnel of the factory inside.

There was only the armored truck, locked and sealed, and the man limping toward it.

There [was] no one else in sight as the truck began to move slowly out of the narrow driveway of the factory, only the truck and the grotesque figure, limping more rapidly now toward a spot where the truck had to pass.

Nothing else moved. But the truck and the hurrying figure were not alone.

High on the side of the wooded hill that overlooked the factory on the highway between Santa Carla and Coopersfield in Southern California, two men crouched and watched the scene below through infra-red binoculars.

They studied the short, shaggy-haired figure limping, and the truck moving slowly down the narrow driveway—the limping man and the truck converging on a point just before the driveway reached the highway.

One of the two men was slender, dressed in a light black sweater and slim black trousers that contrasted sharply with his shock of blond hair that looked as if it had been cut below the edge of a soup bowl. This man's glasses were trained on the slow-moving armored truck.

"They either don't see him, or they don't think he can be of any danger to them," Illya Kuryakin said.

The second man nodded, his glasses trained on the limping figure, which looked even more weird through the infra-red lenses. This man was taller and heavier than his blond companion. A well-built man of average height, with a youthful, half-amused expression on his face.

"They could be right," Napoleon Solo said. "What can he do? The truck is buttoned up like a tank."

"Tanks are hardly invulnerable, Napoleon," Illya pointed out drily.

Napoleon Solo appeared to be thinking this over. His open, handsome face showed little of the sharp and shrewd mind that made him the efficient chief enforcement officer, Section II, United Network Command for Law and Enforcement, better known simply as *U.N.C.L.E.*

"We know he's not even armed," Solo said.

"Do we, Napoleon?" Illya said.

The Number 2 man of Section II (Operations and Enforcement) of U.N.C.L.E. watched the strange scene below and frowned. A loner in a world of organization, Illya's quizzical eyes were often amused; they were not amused now.

Solo, his sharp mind so well-concealed behind the facade of a flippant young executive type, saw his partner's concern.

"We know he left the meeting of the Cult unarmed. Our detectors showed nothing metal, wood or plastic. We've never let him out of our sight since," Solo said.

Illya nodded. "Of course you're right. My gloomy Slavic mind is working overtime. But—"

"But?" Solo echoed quietly in the deepening darkness.

Illya's eyes were glued to the eye-pieces of his infra-red binoculars. "But why has he come forty miles from the Cult meeting to walk unarmed up to an armored truck?" he said softly.

Then, as if the grotesque figure below had heard the question of the small Russian U.N.C.L.E. agent, the two agents had their answer.

"Look!" Solo cried.

Both men had their glasses trained on the events below.

As the truck reached the point of leaving the driveway, the strange, hairy figure below suddenly rose up from a clump of bushes. The man limped two quick steps to the armored truck, thrust out his hand toward the narrow slit of an air vent, and leaped back.

"Air vent!" Solo breathed.

"Gas?" Illya hissed.

"How would you open the truck?" Solo whispered.

But, below, the limping man seemed to have no intention of opening the truck. The instant the truck had passed him, he turned and limped away into the bushes and across the open area toward the wooded hills. He went as rapidly as he could, without a backward glance.

Then, the man did glance backwards, and fell on his face.

The armored truck had not slowed, even after the man had made the motion with his hand toward the air vent. It went on down the driveway, reached the highway, turned—and stopped dead in the center of the highway.

As the two agents watched from the wooded hills in the Southern California twilight, the doors of the truck opened and the guards jumped out. Four

guards, all those in the truck, leaped out, guns ready. They fired as they came out, the long tongues of flames spitting out into the now dark night.

The men from the armored truck fired a withering hail of bullets. They ran and darted all across the road, firing all the time, running for cover. It was a scene of complete battle.

Except that there was no enemy.

The armored guards were firing a deadly hail of bullets at absolutely nothing!

Illya and Solo stared through their infra-red binoculars, and then slowly lowered the glasses and looked at each other.

"Nothing?" Solo said.

"Nothing at all," Illya said. "They are firing as if an army were attacking them, and there isn't anyone."

"Where is our limping friend?"

Illya looked. "Still lying flat. Which means he knew this was going to happen. He wanted no part of a stray bullet."

Solo was again studying the armored car and its wildly-firing guards. Now the suave chief agent of U.N.C.L.E. strained to see more clearly through the infra-red lenses.

"Illya!" Solo said suddenly.

Both agents stared again at the guards, who were still engaged in their bloody battle with an enemy who was not there. The guards were down, flat on the highway and motionless. Even as Illya and Solo watched, the driver, crumpled to the macadam and lay still.

The weird figure with the long, shaggy hair got up and began to limp rapidly away toward the woods and the small car that had brought him to

the factory and the armored truck.

The two agents moved. Each picked up a small, thin attache case.

"You take the truck," Solo said. "I'll follow our limping friend."

"Check. And Napoleon, be careful. There is something very odd happening here."

Solo nodded. The two men vanished like wraiths into the trees on their way down the wooded hillside.

TWO

THE ARMORED truck guards lay on the highway. No traffic passed in the evening on the back road. Illya, cautious, approached the silent men and the empty truck. The guards did not move.

His quick eyes searched the empty road and the dark bushes that bordered it. He saw and heard nothing. No one was near now, and no one had been near when the guards fired their weapons into the twilight, shattering the bushes and trees with bullets.

In the factory building there was light now, faces at the windows, but no one came out. Illya saw, through the distant windows of the factory, a man on the telephone. The police would be here soon, but no one would come from the factory until the police arrived.

He had perhaps fifteen minutes.

Quickly he bent over the fallen guards. They were not dead; there was no mark of any kind on them. They seemed to be in some kind of drugged sleep, and Illya remembered the way the limping man had motioned toward the air vent of the locked armored truck.

He slapped the faces of two guards. Nothing happened. The men neither moved nor groaned. They did not come awake. Illya turned his attention to

the armored truck itself.

The doors of the truck were open, and Illya circled it cautiously. There was nothing unusual, no signs of battle. Inside the truck, through the open rear door, Illya could see the cargo—bags of money.

Nothing seemed to have been taken or even disturbed. How could it have been, since Illya and Solo had seen nothing and no one approach the truck? And yet? The guards had fired at *something*, for some reason.

Illya did not believe in magic, but something which defied logic had happened here. Carefully, he climbed into the truck to check the bags. Five minutes later he squatted in the truck and rubbed his chin. The bags were all full. They had not been opened. Nothing at all seemed to be missing.

Why attack an armored truck of money and take nothing? Why drug the guards, force them out into the open to fire at nothing, and take no money? It made no sense at all. But Illya had long ago learned that everything made sense if you knew the key, the—

And then it made sense.

Illya saw them through the open rear door of the truck. Crouched there inside with the bags of money, he looked out through the rear door and saw them coming from the bushes, out of the shadows, pouring into the road.

Thrush!

Of course, Thrush! Always Thrush!

There were six of them. They had been lying in wait. But they had moved too slowly. Illya crouched among the money bags, fitted the stock on his U.N.C.L.E. special, and opened fire.

There were ten of them now. They fell screaming all across the road as he fired. But others came on, firing as they came.

* * *

NAPOLEON followed the limping man across the wooded country toward the small car Solo and Illya had trailed from the meeting of the Things To Come Brotherhood. The leader of the only branch of the strange cult in America, the limping man looked like some shaggy mutation of a human being.

But crippled and grotesque as the man was, he moved with amazing agility. Solo scrambled to keep up. The man reached his small car, and glanced quickly behind. He had heard Solo, and now he had seen the youthful agent. Solo abandoned his cover and sprinted for his own car.

The small car roared away down the dirt road. In his own car Solo raced after the small car. The cultist drove like a madman, the small car careening down the dangerous dirt road. Solo clung grimly to the wheel of his own car as he followed as closely as he could.

The small car was quicker on the narrow turns, but Solo's car was heavier and held the road better. What he lost in speed on the curves, he gained back by holding the road better in and out of the turns.

But the small car pulled slowly away. And then the dirt road reached the highway—not the highway that went past the factory, but the coast highway. The mountains came down close to the sea, and beyond the road the cliffs dropped to the ocean.

The small car screeched into a turn and vanished down the highway and around a curve. Solo, forced to slow down, made the turn and gunned his heavier car after the vanished small car of his quarry. He rounded two sharp curves without sighting the car of the limping man.

Ahead there was a sickening screech of rubber, a loud, rending crash, and silence.

Solo came around the last curve into a long straightaway—and saw, just where the curve entered the straightaway, the broken guardrail above the

sea. He jammed on his brakes. The highway ahead was completely empty. Solo jumped out of his stopped car and ran to the broken guardrail. The jagged pieces of wood and metal were still quivering.

He looked down over the edge of the sea cliff. Spreading ripples and white foam showed where something had struck. In the center of the circle of white, a black object bobbed on the surface, and, even as he watched, slowly sank.

It was the small black car.

Solo stared down. He saw no sign of life, no one swimming or struggling in the water. Then he looked carefully around him where he stood just off the highway.

Perhaps the limping man had gone over with his car, and perhaps he hadn't. Solo could not be sure either way. And it did not really matter. Either way, he was not going to catch the limping man this night.

Either the cultist was dead with the car, or he was snugly hidden somewhere in the bushes of the mountains across the highway. And if he were alive he was well aware of Solo on his trail. No, Solo would not catch up with his quarry now.

The chief agent of U.N.C.L.E. returned to his car, and turned back. He drove more slowly, but without wasting any time. On the dirt road he wondered if Illya had found anything at the armored truck.

He heard the wild firing as he neared the spot where the small car had been parked. The heavy firing of what his trained ears told him was an U.N.C.L.E. Special firing on automatic.

Silently swearing at himself for splitting up forces, Solo leaped from his car, readied his own Special, and ran through the woods and across the open country toward where he had last seen the armored truck.

Again he swore at himself. Illya had fallen into a trap. Grimly he ran on, hoping he was not too late. But while he was still a hundred yards away, the firing stopped. Solo paused, listened.

There was no sound at all in the dark night.

THREE

SOLO CREPT quickly but silently through the bushes. Moving with the catlike speed of a trained athlete, he reached the edge of the road and looked out. What he saw made him stare in bewilderment.

The road, the guards, and the armored car were exactly the same as they had been when he last saw them.

Nothing had changed.

Illya was not in sight. These were no new bodies. There were no enemies, no one of any kind. Only a distant police siren, wailing faintly and moving closer.

Solo moved out from the bushes, standing openly now, and looked for any signs of the gun battle he had heard as he ran up. The only sign was a smell of burned powder in the night air.

He bent to check the unconscious guards. They were all alive, unharmed, and unmarked. The only injuries visible in the night were the torn and shattered bushes and trees.

And still he had not found Illya. He knew he had not been mistaken about the sound of the heavy firing he had heard—it had been an U.N.C.L.E. Special. Then Illya had to be here, unless they, some enemy, had taken their dead and wounded, and Illya, with them!

Solo was feeling far from happy with this thought; then he looked inside the armored truck. Illya lay face down on the bags of money, his U.N.C.L.E. Special still gripped in his hand.

With a sinking in his stomach, Solo leaped into the truck and bent over his friend. The small Russian did not move. Solo felt his friend's body. Illya was very much alive. Solo could see no signs of a wound or an injury of any kind. Like the guards outside, Illya appeared to be sleeping peacefully.

But Solo checked the Special in the blond Russian's hand. The clip was empty, the barrel still hot to the touch. Solo squatted on his heels in the silent truck and rubbed his jaw. What the devil had Illya been firing at?

In the silence of the dark night Solo felt the hair rise on the back of his neck. There was something very strange, even weird, here on a deserted California back highway. Something connected to a Cult of strange, crippled, shaggy-haired men who worshiped some distant future.

Closer, but still far away, the approaching siren wailed like some disembodied banshee in the night. Solo opened his small attache case and took out a hypodermic needle.

His eyes studied the silent form of his friend. Then he selected a tiny ampoule from the case, snapped it into the case of the syringe, worked the plunger once, and injected the solution into the arm of the unconscious Illya.

Illya groaned, moved. Solo replaced the hypodermic in his case and waited. Illya groaned again, and suddenly came awake. The blond agent leaped up, crouched, his Special aimed and ready. He saw Solo.

"Quick, Napoleon! They're all around us! Cover the left!" Illya cried.

Solo watched the excited Slavic face of his partner.

"It's Thrush! We should have known! They—." Illya said quickly and then stopped suddenly.

Illya blinked his eyes and looked out through the rear door of the truck at the deserted highway in the dark night. Then he turned to Solo.

"Did I kill them all?" Illya said.

"All who?" Solo said slowly.

"There's nothing out there except the guards, Illya"

"Don't be stupid! I saw at least six go down. I— What happened to me? I wasn't hit? I—"

"You just passed out. Your clip was empty, but there are no bodies out there, not even any blood. As far as I can tell, Illya, there never were any enemies out there."

"But I saw them, Napoleon! At least ten Thrush agents. I saw their guns, their black uniforms, I even think I recognized two of them! I tell you I saw Thrush men attacking me!"

Solo nodded. "I'm sure you did, but they just weren't there, Illya. You were firing at nothing!"

Illya's bright eyes looked at Solo from beneath his lowered brows, from under the haystack of blond hair. Then the agent nodded slowly.

"Like the guards," Illya said.

"Like the guards," Solo said.

"Some kind of hallucination. Something still inside the truck," Illya said.

Solo nodded grimly. "I'd say that was it. Something our shaggy, limping friend tossed in through the air vent."

"It was still inside the truck, and when I came in it got to me, too," Illya said. "I thought I saw Thrush attacking. At least we know why the guards came out firing at nothing. They had some kind of hallucination. Probably that they were being held up."

"That has to be it," Solo agreed. "The question is, why, and how, and just what kind of hallucination?"

Illya said, "But we know one more thing—I saw Thrush agents. Why Thrush? Why particularly did my mind tell me that it was Thrush who was attacking?"

"Maybe we can get that answer back at the Cult headquarters," Solo said.

Illya nodded, looked alertly at Solo. "The limping man, what happened?"

Solo told the small Russian. "So he's probably dead, and that leaves us on a limb. We better get back and see what other leads we can pick up at the Cult."

Illya was about to answer when he stopped, listened. There were low groans outside the truck. Illya motioned, and the two agents leaped down to the highway. The armored truck guards were stirring now. The sirens of the approaching police cars were much closer.

"I think," Illya said, "I would much rather not have to explain this to the police."

"A solid piece of thinking," Solo agreed with a grin.

"I suggest we see what we can salvage at the Cult," Illya went on. "Mr. Waverly will not be pleased if we lose our contact."

"You know, I had the same thought," Solo said. "Shall we depart, fast?"

"I think we shall," Illya said.

The sirens were less than a half mile away as the two agents turned and moved off into the night toward their car parked on the dirt road over the wooded hill.

The guards were beginning to sit up, staring around them. From the factory, as the sirens came close, men were now running down toward the road and

the awakening guards.

Illya and Solo vanished soundlessly into the night.

The headquarters of the Things To Come Brotherhood was in a shabby old mansion on the northern outskirts of Los Angeles. As the two agents drove on, the mansion showed no light. Inside the building nothing at all appeared to be moving.

The two agents left their car parked in the shadows and approached the building on foot. There was no one on guard. Illya and Solo moved carefully among the trees and tall weeds of the neglected grounds.

Their informant had alerted them, before they left New York for this mission, that the old mansion and its unkempt grounds had been left to the Things To Come Brotherhood by an insane, but very wealthy, admirer of the Cult.

Close to the tall, dark old frame building the two agents heard no sounds at all. Among the palms and bird-of-paradise plants they looked significantly at each other. Solo grinned somewhat weakly.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking, my Russian buddy?" Solo said.

"I have a certain suspicion that I am," Illya said drily. "I am afraid we have let them slip quietly through our fingers."

"Mr. Waverly will not be pleased," Solo said.

"That, Napoleon, is the understatement of the year," Illya said. "But I think we had better make sure."

To make sure did not take long. After a careful circling of the house, and finding neither light nor sound, Illya tried the front door and found it open. The mansion, so recently the scene of a meeting of some fifty very odd and shaggy people, was now as bare and silent as some forgotten Egyptian tomb.

"You take the left side. I'll take the right," Solo said.

Ten minutes later the two agents met glumly in the front entrance hall again. The mansion was as bare as looted mummy's tomb.

"They even moved out the red velvet they had draping the speakers lectern," Illya reported. "No chairs, no lectern, no velvet bunting."

"Not even a burned cigarette butt," Solo said. "Our limping friend obviously survived the wreck. He hoodwinked me neatly, in that case."

"And to reach here so much before us he must have been picked up by another car," Illya pointed out.

Solo nodded. "Well, they've taken to the hills. It could take a year to dig them all out."

"Perhaps they left some files?" Illya said.

"All Russians are dreamers," Solo said.

They looked. There was, as Solo had suspected, nothing. For a harmless cult of crippled and shaggy-haired lunatics, the Things To Come Brotherhood had moved with remarkable speed and efficiency. The mansion had been swiftly and completely stripped.

The best the two U.N.C.L.E. agents could come up with was a single, empty match cover. The match cover had neither name nor address, just a drawing of a sardonic, devilish face with thick, white hair.

It was Illya who sighed. "We had better report, Napoleon."

"Do we have to?" Solo said.

For answer, Illya brought out what appeared to be a small cigarette case. Opened, the case proved to be a tiny radio sender-receiver, with a miniature tape recorder neatly hidden behind a flat plate that held a row of cigarettes. Illya pressed his send button.

"Code eleven, New York direct, Agent two," Illya said mechanically.

Instantly the quiet, dry voice of Alexander Waverly, Section-I member (Policy and Operations) answered. The chief of the entire Western Hemisphere U.N.C.L.E. operation wasted no time with amenities.

"Yes Mr.—uh—Illya Kuryakin? You have a report?"

Illya reported. At the far end of the radio communication, in his small but bright New York office, Waverly listened in silence. When Illya had finished, the two agents stood in the mansion and waited for the explosion.

"I see. Very enlightening," Waverly's voice said mildly. "Well, you hardly starred this time, but some of it is interesting. Is Mr. Solo there?"

"Here, sir," Solo said.

"Good. Well, I should say your usefulness out there is now minimal," Waverly said. "Return at once."

"You don't want us to finish her?" Solo said, somewhat incredulous. It was not like his dour chief to let them off a hook so easily.

"No," Waverly said. "We have a much better lead here. I think we've found the leader of our Cult."

Illya and Solo looked at each other as they clicked-off. When Mr. Waverly missed an opportunity to point out their many shortcomings, something important had to be happening. They ran to their car and drove off toward the Los Angeles airport.

They were so busy wondering what the better lead was, that for once their habitual alertness was relaxed. They failed to see the bent, shuffling, shaggy-headed figure that limped out of the bushes near the old mansion.

They never saw the weird figure bend over a tiny pencil-like object and begin to talk rapidly.

FOUR

THE SECRET complex of U.N.C.L.E. Headquarters in New York is hidden behind a facade of old brownstones and a single large modern building on a quiet street not far from the river and the United Nations Buildings. There is no way of knowing that the quiet street hides a modern marvel of automated international police work.

There is no way of knowing that the billboard atop the modern white stone building houses an antenna in constant communication with all parts of the world.

There is no way of knowing that boats move beneath the street from U.N.C.L.E. to the river.

There is no way of knowing that the innocent shop in the center of the block, *Del Floria's Cleaning & Tailoring*, is one of the four known entrances into the fortress-like complex of quick men, quick machines, and silent observation.

But what man can hide, man can find.

Someone knew.

As the taxi pulled up in front of Del Floria's Tailoring Shop, and the two men got out, it happened.

Two men, dressed the same as all the other young men walking along a midtown street, paid the taxi driver, then sauntered casually down the street, carrying their attache cases like everyone else.

But someone knew who they were and why they were going into Del Floria's Tailoring Shop. Someone who did not want them to enter Del Floria's—not alive.

The shots came close together. Three shots.

The first shot knocked Illya Kuryakin to the sidewalk.

The second shot went through the attache case of Napoleon Solo—because Solo, with the remarkable reflexes of his youth and his training, had moved the fraction of an inch when the first bullet struck his partner.

The third shot hit the sidewalk at the precise spot where Solo had hit the dirt, but Solo was no longer at that spot, having hit and rolled instantly.

There were no more shots.

Because there was nothing now to shoot at. Both Solo and the far-from-dead Illya were down behind the cover of brownstone steps, their Specials out, their eyes searching the buildings and the windows across the street. On the street itself cautious, if sophisticated, citizens of New York had abandoned both the street and the two agents. There was no screaming, just very fast hiding.

The street was empty for a long minute before other people who had not been close enough to see or hear the shots began to walk forward where the two agents crouched, their eyes looking for their attacker.

"You see anything?" Solo said.

"No," Illya said.

Neither man had looked at each other. Their eyes were too busy looking carefully at every building in front of them.

"How is it?" Solo said.

"Flesh wound, left shoulder," Illya said. "Whoever it is, he is not a good shot. Do you see anything?"

"No," Solo said, still looking only at the windows and the buildings. "Can you get an idea from the wound?"

There was a silence. Then Illya spoke. "Yes, I think I can. And I think I've got him. Look at the tall building a block to the north. Just to the left of the water tank."

Illya was looking through his binoculars. Solo focused his glasses. The building was over five-hundred yards away. At the base of the water tower something glinted, moved. It was too far to be sure even through the glasses, but Illya voiced both their observations.

"One man. Can't quite make him out, but he looks like he needs a haircut."

"I agree," Solo said, "I—"

The voice came from behind them. A dry, clipped voice that spoke in slow, matter-of-fact tones.

"Mr.—uh—Solo, may I ask what you plan as your next move?"

The two agents, crouched low behind the shelter of the brownstone steps, turned and looked up at the aristocratic bloodhound face of Alexander Waverly. The chief of U.N.C.L.E. New York, was sucking on an unlighted pipe, his bushy brows frowning with a mildly critical puzzlement.

"Well—" Solo began.

"The sharpshooter is much too far away for convenient attack," Waverly said in his unruffled voice. "I doubt if he will wait for us to reach him. And it is doubtful that he will attack again, now that he knows he is discovered. Therefore, I suggest we enter the building and get on with our business."

Solo smiled weakly. "Yes, sir."

Illya pursued the matter one more step. "Wouldn't it be a good idea, sir, to see, if perhaps we can catch him? He seems to be still there, and—"

"Our security people are probably almost there by now, Mr. Kuryakin." Waverly said. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir," Illya said.

"Then possibly we can get on with the more important aspects of the matter. My office, I think. There are two gentlemen who have been waiting for an hour to talk to you."

The Section-I leader of U.N.C.L.E. led his two agents through Del Floria's into the maze of steel corridors, all perpetually monitored and observed by Section 4 (Communications and Security). They went down the windowless corridors, past the rows of doors without knobs or keyholes, to the last door at the end of the main corridor on the fourth floor.

This was the office of Alexander Waverly. Inside, two men stood up as the chief led Solo and Illya in. They had been waiting. Also already waiting was the report from Security—the sniper had vanished unseen.

"Sniper?" one of the strangers said.

"Uh, yes," Waverly said. "I rather expect he has something to do with the affair in hand. Certainly not our old friend Thrush. Much too amateurish."

"I don't think it was Thrush," Solo agreed.

"Good," Waverly said drily. "Now may I have that match book you reported about?"

Solo blinked. "The, er, match book?"

"Yes, Mr. Solo. You did very little good out there, I agree, but that match book seems promising. Unless I am mistaken, the picture you described on it is a likeness of the man we have reason to want—Morlock The Great."

FIVE

IN WAVERLY'S office there was a long silence. Then, at the press of a button on his desk, Waverly flashed a picture on the screen on his wall. It

was a full-face and shoulders photograph of a pale, sinister looking man with jet black eye-brows either cut or painted in a sardonic "V".

Although the picture on the match book was a drawing, and the picture on the screen was a photograph, the long nose, satanic eyebrows and general countenance, and thick shock of white hair were unmistakably the same.

"Who is he?" Solo asked.

"Morlock The Great," one of the strangers said. "The world-famous magician. I've seen his act once; it's pretty good and downright creepy. He's a first-rate magician. But we've thought for a long time that he's considerably more than that."

Waverly cleared his throat, his fingers searching in the pockets of his waistcoat for a match to light the pipe. As he searched, he talked.

"Perhaps I had better introduce you gentlemen. Uh—Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin, these two gentlemen are from Interpol. Mr. Fellini is from the Italian branch, and Mr. Dawes from the London office. As you both know, it was Interpol who first asked us to look into the problem."

Dawes, the taller of the two strangers in Waverly's office, nodded. "As far as we can find, chaps, there is no crime. Without a crime we have no jurisdiction. So—"

The shorter Interpol man, Fellini, broke in. "No crime, no, not yet! But there is something very bad, very evil!"

"Quite," Dawes agreed with his more volatile companion. "Something is jolly well up, but nothing we can come out and put a finger on. So we came to you chaps."

Illya leaned forward across the circular conference table. "Perhaps you could summarize for us. All we really know is that there is something peculiar about this cult, the Things To Come Brotherhood."

Dawes looked at Waverly. "You haven't told—"

Waverly found his matches, lighted his pipe, puffed thoughtfully. "I find it useful sometimes not to tell our people all the details of a case until they have learned a certain amount by themselves. However, with what Mr. Solo and Mr. Kuryakin found in California, I think we can now proceed."

U.N.C.L.E.'s New York chief turned his placid eyes toward his two agents. "Briefly, gentlemen, there has been a series of rather odd happenings. I think you will recognize the picture. About six months ago an Italian coastal patrol ship opened fire one night. No reason was ever found for the action; there was absolutely nothing to fire at!

"Guards at two American installations, one in Turkey and one in Venezuela, fought for an hour each to repel an attack, and later it was found that there had been no attack! No one to fire at, and yet they had been sure they were being attacked.

"Then, only last week, soldiers at an English airbase shot down two civilians under the impression that their base was under heavy attack from Soviet forces. There were, again, no Soviet forces, no enemy action of any kind!"

Illya and Solo looked at each other. It was Solo who turned to Waverly.

"Almost exactly what we saw happen out in California," Solo said.

Waverly puffed on his pipe. "Precisely. Also, in each case the soldiers and sailors involved blackened out for a period of an hour afterwards. In addition, there have been a series of robberies in which the guards claimed to have been attacked by hordes of bandits. In each of these cases, no evidence of enemy action was found, all the guards blacked out, much money was taken by the non-existent attackers!"

"Exactly as we saw," Illya said, "except in our case no money was taken!"

Waverly nodded. "That, I believe, tells us how the robberies were accomplished—one man caused the strange hallucinations, and when the guards blacked out, he helped himself to the loot. However, in your case, you were there and scared the man off."

"And the hallucination got me," Illya said.

"It would seem so. But you have confirmed the suspicions of Interpol—the Things To Come Brotherhood is involved in all of this," Waverly said.

Solo narrowed his keen eyes. "Confirmed the suspicions? Then Interpol had reason to think the Cult was involved before we went to California?"

Dawes answered. "Yes, we did, but very stickily. We had an anonymous message, through secret but reliable channels. It came two weeks ago. All it said was that the Things To Come Brotherhood *knew about shadows that attacked*. Naturally, we put two and two together.

"Of course, the message was anonymous and as such rather unreliable, to say the least. But we did feel it important enough to act on. Since there is still no provable actual crime, we decided to drop it in the laps of you chaps."

Waverly took up the story. "I decided to send you two out to the only known chapter of the Cult in this country. The results seem to have warranted the effort, I should say. We now know that the Cult *is* involved in all this. What we don't know is why or how."

Illya nodded. "And Morlock The Great?"

"We have definite proof that he is connected to the Things To Come Brotherhood. He may actually be its leader," Fellini said. "The Cult is growing; we have proof. It is no longer as innocent a collection of fanatics as we had thought."

"They're all crippled in some way, you know," Dawes said. "They always seemed a harmless collection of poor unfortunate people. That ridiculous

long, shaggy hair they wear. But now we're not at all sure. Especially if Morlock is running the show, as we suspect."

"Where is Morlock The Great?" Solo asked.

"In London, I'm sorry to say," Dawes said. "Naturally, we're watching him, but we haven't a shred of evidence to go on."

Waverly frowned at his pipe that had gone out. "Perhaps we will have. Our man in London is expected to report quite soon. With some luck, we can hope for more than we found in California."

"Who is there?" Solo asked.

"Mr.—uh—Morgan, I believe. A good man, despite his limp. He should give us something to go on."

There was a silence as Waverly and his two best agents all looked toward the overseas communication receiver.

* * *

DEEP BENEATH the city of London, in a dank and dim cellar room, the small horde moaned and chanted around the blaze of the great open fire.

The room was low and vast, its corners hidden in shadows not reached by the macabre flicker of the flames from the giant fireplace. In front of the fireplace, where the flames licked at logs, there was a large, flat stone like some ancient savage altar.

The small horde of people chanted and shuffled in a kind of weird dance, a grotesque shuffle, awkward and strange. At first glance an observer would not have been sure why the shuffling dance seemed so peculiar. Then he would have seen—all the people in the vast room were crippled in some way.

Crippled, and with thick, shaggy hair that hung down almost to their shoulders.

They chanted in some strange language, moaned, and shuffled.

But their eyes were all focused on the great, flat stone.

They were waiting.

The fire burned high, the flames licking up, the flickering light creating giant shadows against the encrusted stone walls.

And he appeared.

A puff of thick white smoke and a man stood on the flat stone. A figure on the ancient altar-like stone. Perhaps a man, perhaps not. A monster, certainly.

One thick puff of smoke and the figure stood above all the chanting people. There was a great, low moan of joy.

The figure raised its hands.

Silence.

The figure stood there—a long, satanic face with thick, V-shaped eyebrows, a shock of thick white hair. A sardonic face of normal size—on the body of a child. The figure, the man, was less than five feet tall and very thin but his head, shaped like the head of the Devil himself, was full sized and his eyes glowed with power.

In the silence the shaggy-haired people waited.

The satanic-faced man turned to face the fire. He flicked his wrist, passed his hand before the fire. Thin smoke billowed out from the flames. In the room no one moved or spoke as the fumes spread through the room.

They came out of the fire, out of the flames themselves.

A winged monster with the head of an eagle, the body of a lion.

A squat, ape-like figure with the feet of a hawk.

A slaver creature with the yawning mouth of a shark.

A coiled snake, a giant snake, with plumes on its head.

They came from the fire and seemed to hover above the vast stone room.

There was a great moan of pain and yet of joy, and all the people except the satanic man on the stone altar fell on their faces.

All but the sardonic leader—and one man far off in the shadows of a corner.

This one man, a limping hunchback, let his eyes take in the whole scene; then, silently, he limped away and out through a stone archway. He limped on down a dark corridor until he reached a door. He went through the door and along another corridor.

In this second corridor he changed. He straightened up, his limp became less pronounced, and he moved at a quick trot. He reached another door, opened it, and went up a curving flight of stone steps. At the top two shaggy-haired men watched him as he approached.

The man who had come up from below drew a small pistol and aimed it at each of the shaggy-haired men in turn. The pistol sounded twice—short, spitting sounds. Both his targets fell without a sound, not dead but instantly asleep.

The man jumped over them and entered an elevator. The elevator moved upward. When it stopped the man stepped out with his pistol ready. He shot down three more shaggy-haired guards. He ran, now, to one more door, climbed more stairs, and, at the top, pressed a button.

A slab of rock above him moved open. He climbed up and out into the ruins of a building. He ran through the ruins and came out onto the street of a

city. He turned left and ducked into a doorway. Then he took a tiny, flat metal case from its hiding place inside the doorway.

He opened the case and pressed a button.

"Overseas direct, Waverly New York. Come in, New York!"

The man hunched over the flat metal case. He did not see the limping figures converging on the doorway where he waited. He did not see the tiny man with the white hair and satanic face who stood watching from just inside the ruined building.

"Go ahead, Agent Morgan," a voice said from the flat tin box.

"Code One, Confidential for Waverly," the man snapped.

There was another silence.

The limping figures reached the doorway.

The man looked up then and saw them.

* * *

ALEXANDER WAVERLY spoke into his microphone as Illya, Solo and the two Interpol men watched.

"Go ahead, Morgan. Morgan?"

A silence, and then, from the distant voice, suddenly filled with fear and panic, "End of the world! End of the world! Red at low noon! Red at—"

And screams, screams, screams—and silence.

In the New York office the five men looked at each other.

From the overseas radio—only silence, the screams gone.

ACT II: COME KILL WITH ME

THE LONDON MORGUE was damp and gloomy. No light came down into its dim recesses from the great city outside. The attendant drew out the body. The CID man, Taylor, turned away at the sight, coughing, walking a few feet from the corpse of Alec Morgan.

"Good God!" Napoleon Solo said, his face ashen for once as he looked at the remains of his fellow U.N.C.L.E. agent.

Beyond a small, quick swallow of his throat, Illya betrayed no sign of what the grisly sight meant to him. The small Russian had lived all his life with violent death, with men less human than monsters. He had learned to show no feeling while he dedicated his life to the destruction of such men.

With a sharp motion, Illya stepped to the body of Alec Morgan. The sharp motion was to tell Solo to come with him. Together the two men looked down at the corpse. Every bone had been broken, hacked, torn as if by wild beasts. Alec Morgan had been, literally, beaten to death and torn limb from limb.

But it was the face of the dead U.N.C.L.E. agent that made Illya and Solo stare in horror. The face was twisted into a mask of terror. The eyes bulged in ultimate horror. It was not pain, there was no sign of pain. Illya looked and was sure of that.

"It's not pain. He looks—" Illya began.

"As if he'd seen the most terrifying thing he could imagine," Solo finished.

Illya nodded. "As if he saw his worst fear. And, Napoleon, I would venture that he was not conscious when this was done to him."

Taylor, the CID man, came back. Pale and almost green, the Scotland Yard chief inspector nodded slowly to Illya.

"Funny, but that was what our people thought," Taylor said. "The medical people said most of this was done after he was at least unconscious, perhaps already dead."

"He was unconscious when he saw whatever made his face look like that," Solo said.

Illya nodded, turned away. "Well, I don't see what else we can do here. We better look at what he had with him when you found him."

"In my office," Taylor said.

But, an hour later, they had learned nothing. The miniature tape recorder had been smashed. There were no papers and no clues as to what had happened to Morgan, or where he had been. In Taylor's office, Illya stared at nothing while Solo listened to the chief inspector talk about Morlock The Great.

"He's a weird creature," Taylor said. "Little more than a midget. But those eyes! I've seen him do things myself that I swear aren't tricks, but we've never proven a thing. He's flirted with half a dozen international organizations, all suspected of various types of criminal activity. But this Things To Come Brotherhood seems to be his main activity."

"Just what do you know about them?" Illya said, his eyes hard beneath his lowered brow.

"A harmless cult of fanatics, we thought," Taylor said. "A bit crazier than some others, but without any potential danger to anyone. Or so we thought. They were small enough, just a small group of poor, half-demented, physically handicapped people. Then, about a year ago, they seemed to begin growing.

"They started chapters all over the world. The main chapter is still here in England, however. They are all unknown little people, all crippled in some way. They go around wearing their hair in great, shaggy mops, almost in their eyes. Some of them seem to bleach it or dye it white! We started to

check them not long ago, and while we haven't found a single one with a criminal record, at least a third seem to have been in mental institutions of some kind at one time."

"A third?" Solo said. "Insane?"

Taylor shook his head. "No, not insane. At least not that we can prove. Merely disturbed, neurotics. There's no law against being mentally sick. If there were, ninety percent of the fanatics and cultists would be behind bars. It's not unusual for cult members to have a history of mental trouble. They are almost always poor misfits who join the cult in search for some hope."

"And just what is the hope of The Things To Come Brotherhood?" Illya asked.

Taylor laughed. "To survive. Yes, that's right. They appear to believe that when all the rest of us have blown ourselves to oblivion, they will survive and live happily ever after!"

"Just survive?" Solo said. "On what do they base this, if I'm not asking too much logic?"

"We don't really know," Taylor said. "Cults are like that. They usually have some sort of God-figure—idol, if you prefer—who they think will treat them specially. It seems that our *morlocks* simply believe that they are ordained to survive. Sort of a prophecy, I think."

Illya sat alert, his sharp eyes narrowed beneath the shock of blond hair. "*Morlocks?*"

"That is what they call themselves," Taylor said. "That was how we first got onto the fact that Morlock The Great had something to do with them. Now we think he may be the leader."

"But you can't prove it?" Solo said.

Taylor sighed. "My dear chap, we can't *prove* anything. These shaggy little people just go around saying they will inherit The Things To Come. That's how they get their name. They hold open meetings, talk and talk about how they must prepare for their time, and keep rather quietly to themselves."

"On the surface," Solo said drily. "The one we ran into in California wasn't keeping quietly to himself."

"And the message said the Cult has something to do with all these peculiar attacks that aren't attacks," Illya said.

"And Alec Morgan is dead." Solo said. "He was working on the Cult."

Illya rubbed his chin. "End of the world, and Red at low moon," he mused. "It has to mean something. Morgan was trying to tell us something. A message of some kind, Napoleon."

There was a silence in the office of Chief Inspector Taylor. Both Solo and Illya were hearing those word again screamed across the miles of ocean from London to the New York office of Waverly. Chief Inspector Taylor seemed to have something else on his mind. The CID man hesitated, and then spoke carefully.

"It's just a thought, mind you," Taylor said, "but if those words are intended as a message, it's not likely that Morgan was referring to the actual end of the world?"

"Maybe trying to tell us how important it all was?" Solo said.

Illya disagreed. "I don't think he would be wasting his last words on a warning, Napoleon. I think the Inspector may be right. Morgan wasn't talking about the actual end of the world. No, it was a message of some kind. Something that would help us."

"Then," Taylor said, "Perhaps my little hunch may help. If I was surrounded by enemies, the first thing I'd want to tell you is something that would lead you to the right place for the job."

"It sounds logical," Solo said.

"A place?" Illya said.

Taylor nodded slowly. "*The End of the World* is a pub, a public house. A tavern to you. And it's in the area where Morgan was found."

"A pub!" Solo cried. "Why not?"

"And 'Red At Low Noon' sounds like a password!" Illya said.

Taylor nodded. "It has that sound to me."

The two agents looked at each other. Solo shrugged. He stood up and stretched in the silent office. Then he checked his U.N.C.L.E. Special.

"Well, it's worth a try. We don't have anything else to go on right now, and I hate sitting around," Solo said.

"At least we can have a beer," Illya said.

Taylor said. "Do you want some help?"

Solo shook his head. "Not just yet. If they are up to some big trouble, they probably know your men."

"This will most likely be nothing," Illya said. "I think what you can do is check our Morlock The Great. Find out where he is. If this turns out to be nothing, he's our last lead."

"All right," Taylor agreed.

Solo stowed away his U.N.C.L.E. Special and smiled. "Well, shall we go to *The End Of The World*?"

"It might be interesting," Illya grinned. "I always wanted to be an explorer."

TWO

THE AREA was a vast complex of shabby old buildings, warehouses, and the ruins of war still standing like scars on the city. In many places the ruins had been cleared, and small, new houses put up for the poorer citizens of London. But it was an old and shabby area, the home of men who lived on the edge of life—petty criminals, the poor, the ragged hangers-on of the city.

The End of the World was a large pub, ablaze with light in the center of vast black buildings. There were ruins around the public house, and warehouses, and the dark buildings where both men and rats lived in uneasy peace. In such a world liquor is a way of life, and a stream of people went in and out of the pub.

Barely noticed by the patrons of *The End of the World*, two men limped down the street. One was small and dark, his dark hair thick and shaggy. He limped on his left leg and wore shabby old clothes that had not been cleaned for months. There was a black patch over his left eye, and a thick, black mustache on his upper lip.

"I'll go inside," the disguised Illya said. "I'm somewhat better at acting and fake accents, if I do say so."

The second man nodded. The second man was, of course, Napoleon Solo, but no one would have known that. He was hidden under a thick beard and old, shabby clothes. He limped also, as if his right leg was twisted. He was also, to anyone who might be watching, quite drunk.

"Check," Solo said. "I'll lean on that lamppost over there, where I can watch the door and the street. Keep your radio-ring open. If there's any danger, I can warn you."

Illya set his new transmitter-receiver ring, checked the rest of his hidden equipment and his U.N.C.L.E. Special, and left Solo leaning, apparently drunk, against the lamppost. The disguised Russian limped across the dark London street and into the glare and noise of *The End of the World*.

Through the smoke and noise Illya limped up to the bar and ordered a whisky. His eyes, under his lowered brow, searched the room and the faces at the tables and lined up at the bar.

At first he saws nothing unusual. Then, as he ordered his second whisky, he saw two small, limping men with shaggy hair come into the bar from a back room.

The bartender saw the two men at the same time. He wiped his hands and walked to them. At the far end of the bar they all leaned their heads together and whispered. Illya watched them covertly. The barman, then was involved somehow with the Cult. Probably the two men were members, *morlocks*; they looked like it.

Illya bent over his drink, his left hand just under his lips. He spoke softly, barely moving his lips. "Sonny, this is Bubba. I have two potential bandits. The barman seems to be involved."

Illya sipped his drink, leaned his head down, looked around quickly. He was unobserved. A faint whisper came from his ring. Illya mumbled to himself, half-aloud, to cover the faint voice of Solo from his ring. "All clear her. Nothing unusual. Will stand by. Sonny over and out."

Illya clicked off and resumed his drinking and his scrutiny of the two shaggy men and the barman. As he looked at them again, he saw that they were now looking at him. The two shaggy men were walking toward him. The barman was also walking toward him, but behind the bar.

The bartender reached Illya first, and Illya suddenly leaned across the bar toward him.

"What do you think of 'Red at low noon?' Funny isn't it?" Illya said to the barman.

The barman's hand froze in midair in the process of picking up a glass. The two shaggy men had reached Illya now. They stood on each side of him. The barman nodded toward Illya.

"He thinks 'Red at low noon' is funny," the barman said.

"Does he?" one of the shaggy men said.

"What is 'Red at low noon?' " the second shaggy man said.

"What are words?" Illya said.

"You think 'Red at low noon' is just words?"

"Words to pass," Illya said.

There was a silence as the three of them looked at him. Then one of the shaggy ones motioned the barman away. The barman went. The shaggy man watched Illya.

"From what section?"

"Santa Carla, California," Illya said.

"So?" the second man said. Suddenly he thrust out his hand. Illya did not flinch, did not flicker an eyelid beneath his disguise. The man smiled.

"Welcome, *morlock*. We need more word on Santa Carla. Come."

The two men turned without another word and limped through the smoke and noise toward the door. Illya finished his drink casually, and followed. So far it looked like he had been right, "Red at low noon" was indeed a password. At the door the two men motioned him to hurry. He stepped out into the dark night.

The two men walked ahead to the left, past where Solo was under the lamppost. But Solo was not under the lamppost.

Illya raised his ring to his lips. "Sonny, this is Bubba. I have made contact. Sonny? Come in, Sonny. This is Bubba. Come in, Sonny."

There was only silence. The dim circle of light beneath the feeble lamppost was empty. The ring radio was silent. Illya looked up to see where the two

men were.

He saw them standing in the road directly ahead of him. They seemed to be waiting for him. They were not alone.

As if from out of the earth itself men came limping into the dim light of the street. Many men, all limping, all shaggy-haired.

Illya looked around quickly.

He fingered the U.N.C.L.E. Special in his shoulder holster.

Then he dropped his hand to his side. They were all around him now. Too many of them.

He bent to his radio ring. "Sonny, this is Bubba. Mayday! Mayday!"

There was no answer, and suddenly, there was a great puff of smoke directly in front of him.

A man appeared standing where the smoke blew away. A tiny man with a sardonic face that was all black eyebrows and sharp nose. A man almost a midget, but with a large head of satanic cast. The man laughed.

"Ah, Mr. Kuryakin, I think. We expected U.N.C.L.E. to send someone," the tiny man said.

Illya knew at once that this was Morlock the Great.

Morlock The Great laughed again. "Our man missed you in New York, but we have you now. Very foolish to use that password Morgan gave you."

"I found you with it," Illya said drily. His voice was cool, calm, but his mind raced. Where was Napoleon?

"True, and that you may well regret," Morlock said. "You will also regret coming alone. Strange. I was sure Mr. Solo would be with you."

Illya watched the tiny man. They did not have Solo? The words sounded true. The Cult did not have Napoleon? Then who did? Morlock The Great gave him no more chance to think.

The tiny magician seemed to wave his hand. A cloud rolled over Illya's mind. He felt himself stiffening, losing consciousness. Where was Napoleon?

THREE

NAPOLEON SOLO had waited under the lamppost, feigning drunkenness, and watched Illya enter *The End of the World*. Alert, ready to give the warning if anyone suspicious entered. No one did.

Some time passed. The night was cold and wet under the feeble street lamp, and Solo stamped his feet, sang to convince anyone who watched that he was indeed drunk. He received Illya's first message, and become even more alert. Illya had spotted two possible suspects.

Solo was so busy watching the door and the street that he did not see them come from a building behind him until they were on him. The cold muzzle of a pistol was pressed into his back. An only too familiar voice hissed in his ear.

"Really, Napoleon, that beard!"

Maxine Trent!

"And those awful clothes and thick beard," the Thrush agent purred. "What have they done to you? Why, I hardly get a twinge of desire when I see you like this."

"Good evening, Maxine," Solo said. "Should I say it is a pleasant surprise?"

His alert eyes took in the situation at a glance. Maxine stood behind him, but she held no gun. Another Thrush agent held the gun in his back. There were two other Thrush men, armed and watching him closely.

"It's always pleasant, Napoleon. This time especially. I don't have to kill you," Maxine said sweetly.

"I'm relieved," Solo said.

He turned and smiled at the beautiful Thrush agent he knew so well. Her violet eyes were so deceptively alluring. Her long, soft hair was black now—it could be red, or blonde, or any color she chose for any job. Solo ran her through his mind like a card through a computer. Age twenty-five; all the right measurements; runner-up for Miss America one year; daughter of industrialist Clark Trent. One of the best, most skillful of Thrush agents. A tall, lovely, deadly woman.

"To what do I owe my good fortune?" Solo said.

"I need you," Maxine said. "I want to know all you know about Morlock The Great and the Cult."

"So you're working with him?" Napoleon said. "That makes him a little more dangerous."

Maxine smiled. "Why, thank you, Napoleon. I take that as a compliment. Thrush will be pleased. Now, tell me—"

The beautiful Thrush agent stopped. Her violet eyes were looking across the street. Solo whirled. The door of *The End of the World* had opened. Two shaggy men stepped out.

"Well—" Solo began.

He got no farther. As he turned back to Maxine, the tall woman reached out and touched his neck with her hand. She was smiling. Solo felt the tiny pin prick, and knew no more.

* * *

ILLYA opened his eyes. There was no light. He moved and found that he was lying on a damp stone floor. He flexed his arms and his hands. He was not tied up. He felt his face—his disguise was gone.

He sat up and looked around. His eyes, as they grew accustomed to the dark, saw the confines of his prison. Four stone walls, no windows, perhaps ten square feet of floor space. A table and a chair. Nothing else.

And not a sound. He listened. The stone room was quieter than a tomb. No sound at all.

He looked at his watch. Strangely, they had left him all his clothes, his jewelry and hidden weapons. His U.N.C.L.E. Special, and his knife, were gone. Also his eye patch and false mustache. His watch showed that no more than half an hour had passed since he had left *The End of the World*. Then he had to be still somewhere in London.

But there was no sound at all. The entire life of the great city gave no hint of existing somewhere beyond the stone walls. He felt no drafts, no current of air. Nothing on the surface could be this silent. He was underground—in a stone room far under the earth.

Somewhere deep under the heart of London the *morlocks* must have headquarters, their real headquarters. The shaggy, limping creatures lurking in hidden passages under the earth and—. And Illya stopped. If there had been any light his eyes would have brightened.

He had it! *Morlocks!* The Things To Come Brotherhood! What had Taylor, the CID Inspector, said? They believe they will survive! Of course, H. G. Wells and his Time Machine! They had mixed two of H. G. Wells's stories. The *morlocks* appeared in *The Time Machine*. *Things To Come* was another book. And yet, both books were much the same—they presented what Wells thought the future would be like!

A world destroyed—and the *morlocks* survived! More than that, the *morlocks* ruled the future! A mutant race of shaggy-haired, half-crippled men who lived on, and controlled, their more fortunate-looking fellow

humans. This Cult had merely taken the deformed and cast-out, the survivors of mental wards, and told them they would, indeed, survive and inherit the earth!

Ridiculous, half-insane; yet what else was any Cult? Cults grew because some people, some groups, had to have a dream to believe, no matter how crazy it was. What better dream than to believe that you will inherit the earth, and are, therefore, really better than all the normal, healthy, handsome people?

But what were they up to now? Harmless, Taylor had said. Perhaps they may have been once, but now—

Illya jerked from his reverie. There had been a sound, a noise. Even as he watched, a section of the wall opened and a figure entered.

Two figures.

A shaft of light from outside fell on Illya, revealing him, but also revealing the two figures.

They were more grotesque than any he had seen before.

One was a heavy, ape-like figure with its face barely visible beneath the shaggy shock of white-dyed hair.

The second was a thin, hunchbacked figure that shuffled behind the first, its face also invisible under the shaggy hair. This second figure carried a long club. Both *morlocks* moved to stand over Illya. The agent tensed to attack. There were only two. But he never moved.

Even as he prepared, the hunchback raised his club and smashed it down on the head of his companion.

* * *

NAPOLEON SOLO heard the water and felt the motion of the barge under him. He was pinioned securely to the chair. The two Thrush agents were preparing their instruments. Maxine grinned at Solo

"Come now, Napoleon dear. Don't make me resort to such old fashioned methods."

"Believe me, all I want to know what you in U.N.C.L.E. have learned about Morlock The Great, the Cult, and how they make people fight when there is nothing to fight."

"I'll bet you would," Solo said.

"I have orders to let you go if you co-operate. You know how unprecedented that would be. Really, Napoleon, all we want this time is some information."

"That's all? You ask so little, Maxine," Solo said.

"Please, Napoleon, I have a few scores to settle, but I'm willing to forget if you would just—"

Maxine stopped. Solo, tied securely, could not see what she was looking at, but she was looking at something or someone over his shoulder. She nodded quickly, and stepped past Solo out of his sight. The agent was not worried about Maxine; he was still watching the two Thrush men preparing their tortures for him.

He saw that they had their backs to him. He listened. He could hear no one behind him. He began to work on his bonds. They were secure. And the thorough Thrush people had taken all the secret weapons they could find. But they had not taken everything.

At that moment Maxine Trent returned. The beautiful Thrush agent smiled down at him.

"I have to go, Napoleon. I will leave you in the capable hands of Walter and Bruno there. Remember, they have instructions to let you go once you have talked fully."

With that, Maxine turned on her heel, spoke low and sharp to the two torturers, Walter and Bruno, and walked quickly from the cabin of the barge. Moments later, Solo heard a motor boat roar away.

Silence descended on the barge. He listened, but he could hear no other sound of life but the lapping water. He heard the water and the metallic sounds of Walter and Bruno preparing for his torture. Then all sound stopped but the water.

Walter and Bruno turned to look at him. Both of them smiled. Solo did not have to ask. He could see that Walter and Bruno were going to enjoy their work on him.

FOUR

ILLYA FOLLOWED the limping hunchback down dark corridors and through many narrow stone rooms. His keen eyes studied the walls and corridors. The corridors were no longer of damp stone, they were concrete—thick new concrete. He saw air vents high in the walls.

At last they reached a small room far from the stone prison he had been kept in. This room had no entrance and was piled to the ceiling with cans of food. Or, to be exact, the room had an entrance, a door, but that was not the way the hunchback led Illya into the room. They entered through a large hole left when the hunchback removed a loose stone in the corridor.

The hunchback replaced the stone and turned to smile at Illya.

"We will be safe here for a time. That door is locked on the outside. Only the inner council members have keys."

"That loose stone?" Illya said.

"Only I know about that. I had repaired it for myself in case I was discovered."

Illya looked at the crippled man. Now, smiling, and with the thick hair pulled back from his face, Illya could see that the hunchback was relatively young, not at all bad looking.

Under the hair was a gentle, intelligent face.

"You wrote that note to Interpol?" Illya said. "About the firing at shadows?"

The *morlock* nodded. "Yes, I wrote it. My name is Paul, Paul Dabori. I joined them when I felt I must have some friends, but now I know there is something wrong. They must be stopped. You are from Interpol?"

"No, from U.N.C.L.E.," Illya said.

"Ah, I have heard of U.N.C.L.E.," Dabori said. "That is better."

Far off, suddenly, there was a sound of gongs. Loud, frantic ringing of gongs. Illya stood alert in the dark of the hidden storeroom. Paul Dabori nodded. The hunchback seemed disturbed.

"They have discovered your escape. I killed the other guard, but they are not all fools. They will guess that I have helped you. We will not be safe here much longer."

"Why must they be stopped?" Illya said.

"I will tell you, but first we must escape." Dabori said.

"How?"

"I have a way. This was an ancient cellar. It connects to the sewers. That is our only way out, the sewers down to the river."

"All right. Let's go now," Illya said.

Dabori shook his head. "No, I know how they will search. We must wait until they are almost here; then we can pass them and reach the sewers. You see, we must go through some of the new corridors to reach the old sewers."

In the dark Illya sat with the hunchback. The two men listened to the incessant clangor of the gongs, the distant sounds of voices and running feet. Illya stood up to inspect the room. He saw that the cans were filled with basic foods: meats, vegetables, butter, sugar. All in cans.

And there were large cans of plain water. Puzzled, Illya continued his search.

There was medicine, and surgical supplies, and some large cylindrical objects that Illya recognized as air filters. Then he touched the walls. The walls were not stone on the inside.

The walls were lead!

"Yes," Dabori said behind him. "The walls are lead-lined. The new concrete is twelve feet thick. There is food and water for a hundred men for six months. The new parts are all sealed into a unit; the air is filtered through many filters. There is even oxygen in case the vents must be closed for a time."

Illya touched the lead walls again. Then he slowly turned to look at Dabori.

The hunchback, even in the dim interior of the hidden storeroom, was grim.

"An atom bomb shelter," Illya said. "A secret, and very well built atom bomb shelter!"

"Yes," Dabori said. It is part of the plan. There are many such shelters in the world now, all the plan of Morlock The Great. That is why I had to tell—"

Dabori stopped, held up his small hand. Illya froze. Just outside the room he heard voices and footsteps. Someone tried the door. Outside men stood

around the door. Illya took hold of his small, cuff-link gas bombs, and waited.

* * *

WALTER and Bruno bent to take off Solo's shoes. They both bent down, eager to get to work. Solo waited until their faces were both close to him near his feet. Then, with a powerful effort, he lifted his entire body, and the chair itself, a few inches off the floor in a jump, and came down on the heel of his left shoe.

The two Thrush men, intent on the anticipation of torturing Solo, failed to react for a split second. It was enough. As Solo made his jump and came down, they reacted and hurled themselves backwards. They were too late.

A spurt of reddish gas burst from the capsule hidden in Solo's heel. The gas quickly expanded flush into their faces. They gasped once each.

Solo hurled himself over backward and as far as he could go. Even then he got a faint whiff of the gas before it dispersed in the air of the barge cabin.

The whiff made his head reel, made him fight for consciousness. Everything went black and green and red and he felt himself slipping away; then it was gone. He lay in a sharp draft of wind from under the door.

Quickly he crawled himself around on the floor, the chair still firmly tied to him. Walter and Bruno had taken the full dose straight into their faces before they had time to jump away. They both lay flat, eyes staring at nothing, barely breathing.

Solo had two hours.

In two hours they would revive—with headaches, but otherwise as good as ever. Before then, Solo had to be free. Where he lay, his eyes searched the barge cabin. What he wanted was on the leg of that very table where Walter and Bruno had prepared their instruments of torture—a small blowtorch with a thin jet of blue flame.

Painfully, Solo gathered his muscles and heaved himself to his knees. He swayed to his feet with another lunge upward, staggered, crouched over with the chair against his back and legs, knees bent where they were tied to the chair. But he did not fall, the training and balance of the trained athlete coming to his aid now.

Earlier, while they were overpowering him, he had cursed as his hand, rasping against a corner of the table, had grated on a rough, abrasive edge of the wood, which had in fact tore some skin from his hand. Solo stared down at the ragged fused bit of wood and metal. Solo grinned, the sweat running into his eyes. Then he lay down and went to work.

They had made one mistake in binding him. After looping the rope firmly around his legs, they had tied it off to the rear rung of the chair—as far from his hands and feet as they could get. Now that was going to free him. He extended his legs until the chair, where he lay on his side, rubbed against the roughened table leg, just under where it joined the upper surface of the table itself.

It was hard, back-breaking work, scraping the rope against the table. He was lying at an awkwardly cramped angle, so that the labor of rubbing his legs against the abrasive spot put a terrific strain on his lumbar muscles. Every ten minutes he had to rest, panting. After what seemed like an eternity, he strained, almost without hope, and felt the torn rope part.

For a precious moment he fell back on the floor, hoarding and restoring his strength which had been so sorely spent. Then, not daring to rest longer, he went to work again.

Quickly now, his legs free, he stood up straight, the chair still tied only to his arms behind him. They had not been stupid enough to use only one rope. He looked at Walter and Bruno. The two Thrush men had not moved. Grinning to himself again, Solo repeated the operation, but much more easily this time.

With his legs free, he was able to maneuver his body to where the ropes on his hands and arms crossed the upper part of the table leg.

Three minutes later he was free, with nothing worse than two ugly scrapes on his hand.

He threw the chair away, and quickly felt the lining of his jacket. He found, and drew out, a tiny flat needlelike object. Then he found a flat, capsule-like object inside the thick cuff of his trousers. The capsule-like, flat cylinder was wrapped in a tiny net of cotton. He fitted the capsule into the miniature syringe, bent over Walter, and inserted the needle into the Thrush man's arm.

He squeezed the fat capsule.

Walter jerked, shuddered, his limbs moving in spasms. Then the Thrush man's eyes began to flutter. Suddenly they came open. But Walter was not awake, not really.

Solo bent close to the ear of the Thrush man. "Where did Maxine go? Agent Trent, where did she go and why? Answer!"

Walter's eyes blinked, his body jerked, his lips began to move. "Uh—No—I will not—" The Thrush man shuddered convulsively. "I—she went to—Morlock. The country house; Salisbury—you must capture him and make him—tell—"

Solo let the man fall back and threw away his now useless miniature syringe of powerful truthserum and stimulant. Moments later he was swimming in the icy water of the Thames. He reached the shore, a wide flat of mud at low tide, and climbed up the embankment. It took him five minutes to locate a telephone, and five more minutes to get the exact location of Morlock The Great's house near Salisbury.

"Can I help now, Solo?" Inspector Taylor asked from the far end of the line.

"Stay where you are," Solo said. "If Illya can't get to me, he'll probably contact you. Tell him where I've gone!"

Ten minutes after that a black car, delivered to the bank of the Thames by a silent man in a business suit, raced away toward the south and west toward Salisbury.

The silent man was an U.N.C.L.E. agent in London. Section I (Communications and Security). The man driving the car was Napoleon Solo—re-armed and anxious to find Maxine Trent and her men.

FIVE

FIVE MILES from the ancient cathedral town of Salisbury, the magnificent spire of the cathedral itself out of sight to the north, the black car slowed to halt five hundred yards down a country lane from a big, gothic house. Behind the wheel, Solo looked at the silent house through his infra-red binoculars.

What he saw made him slide silently from his car and fade quickly into the thick hedgerow that bordered the country land. They were there. Two black cars and at least seven Thrush men, wearing their black uniforms and carrying ugly rifles with heavy, round infrared night scopes.

Cautiously Solo moved closer. They, the Thrush men, were deployed around the old house. The house itself was dark and silent. Solo looked for Maxine Trent. He finally located her standing with two Thrush chief guards near one of the two cars. They appeared to be planning their attack.

Solo edged closer, his U.N.C.L.E. Special ready, but cautious because there were too many of them. They seemed ready to move. One of the two chief guards of Thrush stepped forward from the shelter of the car toward where his men waited. He took two steps—and stopped.

High on the third floor of the gothic house, on a small balcony, there was sudden flash and a great red glow seemed to bathe the facade of the house in eerie red light. The Thrush attackers stared upward.

The night was as bright as day with the red glow.

On the small balcony there was a puff of blue smoke.

A man stood on the balcony.

Solo recognized the satanic face of Morlock The Great.

The midget-like figure with the oversized head stood high on the balcony and laughed down at the gaping Thrush men.

The Thrush leader stared upward.

For a long minute nothing moved, nothing happened but the weird laughter of the midget bathed in the red glow. Then Maxine Trent shouted.

"There he is! Take him alive!"

As if galvanized by an electric shock, the Thrush men leaped up and ran toward the house. They did not hesitate a second the command of their superior far more powerful to them than any fear. They ran up the steps of the old house—and fell in a hail of withering fire.

The Thrush men screamed. The red glow went out on the balcony above. In the dark the Thrush men stumbled across the porch and into the house. Inside there was more fire and more screaming in pain.

Solo watched as a Thrush man ran back out onto the steps of the old house.

"Empty! The place is empty!"

"Someone fired at us!" a Thrush leader cried.

"No one! Automatic fire. Booby trap!"

Solo saw the flash of blue light to the left. The light flashed at a spot fifty yards from the house. A blue light bright on a small hillock. Another puff of smoke, white this time, and Morlock The Great stood on the hillock, laughing Maxine Trent cursed and shouted to her surviving men.

The Thrush soldiers ran toward the small hillock.

Solo watched. He was impressed by what he knew had to be tricks. He had seen great magicians work before. But they were impressive tricks. Even though he knew that this was Morlock's house and would have been prepared, the trick of the smoke and lights was enough to almost frighten him.

On the hillock, Morlock laughed. His tiny, devilish figure mocked the running Thrush men.

As the Thrush soldiers reached the foot of the hill they vanished in a series of explosions. Solo nodded. Mines. Morlock had taunted the Thrush men into a small, private minefield.

The Thrush soldiers groaned, screamed.

Morlock The Great vanished from the hillock.

Once more the tiny magician appeared, this time on a tall stone two hundred yards from the house. A puff of red smoke and the midget magician stood there.

No one pursued him.

Only Maxine Trent, safe behind the car, was left to stand and stare at the distant figure. Morlock laughed once more, and was gone.

Solo stepped out of the bushes and stood behind Maxine Trent.

"You're having a hard night, Maxine," Solo said.

The woman agent whirled, her violet eyes flashing in the dark. She reached down, lifted her skirt to show her long, magnificent leg. Solo saw the holster strapped to the shapely thigh.

"Ah, ah, Maxine!" Solo said, his Special trained on her. "You're all alone now."

Maxine hesitated, smiled, straightened up and looked around her at the bodies of her men.

"So I am, Napoleon. But not really, darling. I have you," Maxine said.

Solo grinned. "Correction. I have you. Shall we go?"

Maxine shrugged. Solo motioned her into the silent house. He stepped warily, watching for more of Morlock The Great's little traps, and for the very possible return of the wily little magician himself.

But inside the house all was silent. There were no more traps, no sign of Morlock The Great. In fact, there was nothing inside the house at all. Solo stared around slowly at the vast emptiness. Even Maxine Trent blinked her violet eyes in a puzzled surprise.

Why would Morlock The Great come to an empty house? And why have an empty house so well booby-trapped with automatic weapons and mine fields?

* * *

THE GENTLE-FACED hunchback, Paul Dabori, sat against the wall of the lead-lined storeroom deep under the great city of London. The voice and footsteps outside had gone away without searching the storeroom, and Illya listened as Dabori told his story.

"I was lonely, I suppose, Mr. Kuryakin," Dabori said. "We are all lonely, we human beings, one way or the other. But for a man like me—"

"You seem like a very good man," Illya said quietly.

Dabori shrugged. "I was, I suppose, feeling sorry for myself. I joined them. They said that since we who were crippled, deformed, were shut out from the rest of the world, we had to make our own world. I was full of self-pity then. I listened. It was, they told me, a brotherhood and a literary society."

"And then you found that they were building the atomic bomb shelters?"
Illya said.

Dabori nodded. "Here, and under Morlock The Great's house at Salisbury. I helped work on that shelter. They have built them all over the world."

"Why?" Illya said grimly. "Why are they building them? Just in case? To be sure to survive? That is possible, but you don't think so, do you, Paul?"

"No. Morlock has a plan of some kind, a plan that will be put into effect soon. Somehow it involves all those robberies and the attacks where no one attacked."

"Soon?" Illya said.

"Very soon, I think."

Illya stood up in the hidden, lead-lined storeroom. "Then we must get out of here. Tell me, have you seen another prisoner?" And Illya described Solo.

Dabori shook his head. "No, no one like that. But perhaps Morlock took him to the Salisbury house. Morlock is there now himself."

"You know how to get there?" Illya asked the hunchback.

"Yes," Dabori said. "But we cannot go yet. They are still searching for you. We must wait."

"But not long," Illya said. "Soon we'll have to take some action, Paul."

Dabori nodded. "I know. I am ready."

In the dim light of the lead-lined room Illya Kuryakin and the gentle hunchback listened and waited.

* * *

SOLO and Maxine Trent completed their search of the house. In the front hall, with the bodies of two of her men, they stood and considered what they had found.

"Nothing," Maxine said, undisturbed by the bodies of her men. "Absolutely nothing."

"But wired for defense. Why?" Solo said. "It's your turn to tell me what I want to know, Maxine. For instance, there should be a cellar under this house, but there seems to be no entrance into a cellar."

"I noticed the same thing. You think the real part of this place is down below?"

"Why don't you tell me, Maxine?" Solo said.

"Oh for God's sake, Napoleon, don't you realize yet that we're not working with Morlock The Great! He just killed eight of my men!"

Solo grinned, his Special still warily trained on the beautiful Thrush agent. "With Thrush that could be a lover's quarrel."

"For the last time, you fool, Thrush is just as anxious to stop Morlock The Great as U.N.C.L.E. is! Do you think we want some other organization getting in our way?"

"Not enough spoils to go around, eh?" Solo said.

Maxine shrugged. "If you like, yes. We in Thrush have no love for competitors. We have enough trouble with do-good outfits like U.N.C.L.E. without having to worry about amateur competitors."

Solo smiled. "Just what are you suggesting?"

"That we pool forces! There, I said it! Think of it, Napoleon—for once we can work together. You want to stop the Cult, whatever it's up to, and so do we. You saw how much Morlock loves us! I say we work together."

"Why should we? You want to know what we know. What do you have to offer?" Solo said.

"Illya Kuryakin and how to save him," Maxine said.

Solo watched the beautiful Thrush agent. He did not trust her as far as he could have thrown all of England. But if she knew where Illya was! After all, it was obvious that she, and Thrush, were not working with Morlock and his Cult this time.

"You know where Illya is?"

"I saw them take him, Napoleon, and I know how to get into their London headquarters," Maxine said.

Solo grinned. "Then welcome, partner."

Maxine laughed. "It has a nice sound. And may I have my gun back?"

"On one condition," Solo said.

"Condition, Napoleon dear?"

"That I can put it back into its holster."

"Napoleon, you do care!"

Smiling, Solo returned her small pistol to its holster on her long, beautiful leg. Maxine laughed as Solo kissed her lightly. He, too, laughed—he had taken the precaution of palming the bullets from the clip before he returned the pistol.

"Shall we go to London?" Solo said.

"Lead on, partner," Maxine said.

ACT III: THE LAST SHALL BE FIRST

MAXINE TRENT lifted her skirt to climb up out of the old sewer onto the ledge of dry stone. Solo followed her. Together they stood in the dark far below London. Rats scurried against the ancient stone walls, and ahead there was a door.

"That's it, Napoleon," Maxine said. "One of our men located it last week."

"Where does it lead?"

"Into the old tunnels and corridors. There are new corridors, but I think we can find a way through."

"Stay here," Solo said.

The agent inched along the stone ledge to the old door. It was rusted and locked, but there was a trace of oil around the lock. The door had been used. Solo took out a small strip of what looked like foil and stuck it to the door next to the lock. The foil was self adhesive. Solo pulled a small metallic thread and jumped back.

The foil burst into an intense white heat. The door glowed around the lock, melted, and when the white hot glow died away in the dark sewer, a gaping hole had appeared in the metal around the lock. Solo stepped forward and pushed the door open. He motioned to Maxine.

Together, Solo and Maxine stepped through the door and into a short stone tunnel that led to a flight of stone steps going upward. Carefully, they moved up the stairs in the pitch dark. The steps did not go far, and came out in a low room that stank of slime and ancient decay.

They crossed the low room and went through an archway into another low stone room. The second room was low but vast, its corners hidden in the

dark. Solo flicked on his ring flashlight. The ultra-powerful beam picked out all the corners of the vast room.

Rusted metal rings hung from the walls; rusted metal cages littered the floor. Spikes that had once been sharp protruded out from the walls. There was a cauldron and a brazier all turned to dust at Solo's touch. What had once been skeletons lay on the floor, nothing now but white dust.

"Things don't change much," Solo said. "It reminds me of a Thrush headquarters."

"Ah, ah, Napoleon dear. Remember, we're partners; speak nicely about us," Maxine said.

"I'd rather speak nicely about how we're going to get out of here," Solo said, his powerful miniature light playing around the walls. "I don't see any way out, and no one's been in here for centuries. There must be another way in; that door had been oiled."

"Then we better find it," Maxine said.

They turned and retraced their steps to the smaller stone room. As they passed out of the vast room into the smaller one, Solo suddenly crouched and pulled Maxine down. His U.N.C.L.E. Special was out. Maxine held her pistol.

Something moved along the right wall of the smaller room. Solo and Maxine waited, watched. His light out, Solo crouched with his Special trained on the wall. A Stone moved, a large stone.

The stone fell into the room.

Someone, a figure, came through the hole in the wall. A second figure followed. The two figures turned to replace the stone.

Solo switched on his miniature flashlight ring.

The two strangers dove for the floor.

Solo and Maxine shone the light directly on the two and stepped forward with their weapons.

* * *

DEEP beneath the city of London, in a large, soundproof room lined with thick sheets of lead, the twelve men sat at the long table and watched their leader. They were all deformed, disfigured men, and their leader was Morlock The Great.

The tiny magician stood before a great map of the world. His thin, delicate hands swept an arc in the air that took in the whole world and the many red pins on the map. His eyes gleamed in his large head.

"They are all completed. We are ready. We will not wait now."

"And Kuryakin?" one of the men at the table said.

"He does not matter. He and Dabori cannot escape from her," Morlock said.

"Dabori perhaps has found a way. I never trusted him," another man said.

"It does not matter!" Morlock said. "If they escape it will be too late. We know they have not yet escaped. I am telling the Inner Council, you men, that the day is at hand! We move—tonight!"

The twelve men at the table looked at each other, and their eyes glowed like the eyes of their leader. Morlock The Great laughed a diabolical laugh that filled the large room where the Inner Council of the Brotherhood held their secret meetings.

"They all want to stop us, but they will not!" Morlock said. "After tomorrow the prophecy will be fulfilled—we will inherit the whole Earth!"

Excitement ran through the room like an electric current. The members of the Inner Council began to talk, to congratulate their chief. Suddenly, there

was a low buzz and a light over the single door began to blink. Morlock pressed a button.

"Yes?" the tiny magician said.

"Report strangers entering the old vaults from the sewer!"

"How many?" Morlock snapped.

"Two, sir. The detector shows that they are armed."

"Very well. Deal with them!" Morlock snapped, and then said, "No, wait. I will come and deal with them myself."

The midget switched off his communicator. His satanic features twisted into a crazy grin as he surveyed the members of his Inner Council.

"As a precaution, we will find out who they are and what they know. But, whoever they are, they will not stop us now. Tonight, gentlemen! Tonight the *morlocks* take over the world, as predicted long ago!"

In the large, secret room far below the great city, there was a savage shout from all the leaders of the Cult

* * *

AS HE stepped toward the two figures on the old stones, Napoleon Solo grinned. But he didn't feel as happy as he looked.

"Really, Illya, you look silly lying there," Solo said.

Illya raised his head. The small Russian stood up and dusted himself off.

"What took you so long, Napoleon?"

"I was delayed," Solo said, "but I brought a friend. Step forward, Maxine."

Maxine Trent came into the light of the tiny ring flashlight. The beautiful Thrush agent smiled at Illya.

The blond U.N.C.L.E. agent raised an eyebrow.

"A friend, Napoleon?"

"In this case, apparently," Solo said, and explained the details of Thrush's participation in the affair.

"It should be an interesting experience," Illya said as he eyed Maxine from under his lowered brows. "I, too, have a friend. Paul Dabori is the man who sent the warning to Interpol."

Illya recounted his experiences and the four of them squatted in the dark, the light out now, to plan their next move. Solo rubbed his chin.

"Atom bomb shelters," Solo said slowly.

"That explains why the house in Salisbury was so empty. A bomb shelter underneath it," Maxine said.

But Solo was not listening. He was rubbing his chin, thinking. Now he looked at Illya and the *morlock*, Paul Dabori. The hunchback waited eagerly to see what he could do.

"Atom bomb shelters," Solo said again, "and robberies for money to stock them, probably. And hallucinations that make men think they are being attacked."

Illya nodded. "Are you thinking the same thing, Napoleon?"

"When you had the hallucination," Solo said, "you thought Thrush was attacking you."

"The enemy most on my mind," Illya said. "Yes. And those armored car guards thought they were being robbed—what was most on their mind."

"And the Cult believes that they will survive while the rest of the world goes under," Solo said.

There was a silence, and it was Maxine Trent who finally spoke. Maxine had listened, and now she spoke.

"And they have built atom bomb shelters. So it is clear that Morlock The Great intends to help his Cult survive. He doesn't intend to wait, he's going to make the atom bombs drop!"

Illya sighed. "It looks very much that way. I'm afraid that rather than wait for us to kill each other off, he's going to help us—by starting an atomic war!"

Dabori finished it. "And soon. I know it is soon. They are worried that they will be discovered."

This time the silence was deeper. Maxine Trent seemed lost in her own thoughts. Solo and Illya were seeing the horror of what they had just said. Somehow, Morlock The Great intended to set the powers of the world at war with each other—an atomic war in which the only survivors would be the Cult itself, deep in its shelters. Illya moved.

"You brought weapons for us?" Illya said.

"Of course," Solo said.

Solo hands the extra U.N.C.L.E. Special he had brought to Illya, and handed Dabori the small pistol he carried as a spare. Maxine drew her own pistol from the holster on her leg.

The four crawled back through the opening in the wall into the inner corridor. They followed Dabori as the hunchback led them back along the old stone corridors until they reached a lead door. Dabori opened this door with a key he had stolen, and the four stepped through into the new shelter-headquarters of the Cult.

TWO

AFTER A time, moving down the silent concrete concrete corridors with their faintly whirring air-vents and lead doors, they became aware of a strange silence. Dabori was the first to raise his head. The hunchback was puzzled.

"We should have met guards. There should be noise, some activity," Dabori whispered.

"How many men are down here?" Solo asked, his voice low.

"Normally fifty who are the regulars, and some fifty more who come and go. Morlock did not want too many of us to vanish from the surface at one time. Most of the Cult hold down regular jobs. Only a cadre of elite are permanently down below," Dabori explained.

They continued along the concrete corridors, so silent they could have been buried beneath the Sahara Desert. Illya was worried.

"Do you think Morlock could have started his plan?" the blond Russian said.

"I don't know," Dabori whispered. "He could have. I know it was to be soon."

"You mean you think they have all gone to start whatever their plan is?" Maxine asked.

"It is a possibility," Illya said. "We have no idea what the plan is."

"How can we find out?" Solo spoke quietly to Dabori.

The hunchback shrugged. "The Inner Council. They are the only ones who would know, and they will be very hard to reach, very dangerous."

"Can you get us to them?" Illya said.

"I can take you as far as I know," Dabori said. "That is to a chamber I have seen them enter. The chamber is not where they meet, but it must lead to where they meet. It is always empty after they enter, and there must be some secret exit because they do not come back out for a long time."

"Let's find out," Solo said.

Dabori nodded and, when they reached a cross corridor in the maze of thick concrete tunnels and lead-lined rooms, led them down the corridor to the right. They twisted and turned through the catacomb of concrete. Still they met no one, heard no one. Maxine became nervous.

"It's not right," The Thrush agent said. "It's not natural to meet no guards, hear nothing, Napoleon."

"Until we know better, let's be thankful," Solo remarked.

"Unless we are too late," Illya said grimly.

They moved on through the silent tunnels with Illya's words in their minds. Already hell could be breaking loose above, and they would be trapped down here—safe, but for how long? They would survive the holocaust above, but there was not one of them who thought they would be welcome guests of Morlock the Great.

"There," Dabori said.

They had reached a widening of the corridor, a long, narrow room of benches and tables, obviously a kind of dining hall, to be used during the long, lonely days of waiting for the surface to be safe again. Doors were cut into the concrete walls. It was a small door to their left that Dabori pointed to.

"Stand back," Solo said.

He placed another strip of heat foil on the lock and pulled the metallic cord. The foil burst into white heat. The door melted around the lock. The four

hurried through into a small, empty room. Solo indicated the four smooth walls.

"Look for a secret door," Solo said.

The voice that answered was not one of the other three. It was a voice from nowhere.

"Spare yourself, Mr. Solo," the sardonic voice said. "I will show you where the door is."

There was a rumble of concrete and the wall on the left slid, moved and there was a door leading into blackness. The voice was faintly mocking.

"*Voila*, gentlemen, and lady—the door!"

Illya crouched, let his eyes search the walls around. There was nothing. Solo looked carefully for the source of the voice. Maxine Trent held her pistol and looked from wall to wall. Only Dabori did nothing. The hunchback stood there calmly. Unafraid, but aware that there was nothing to be done.

The voice spoke. "You wish to see me? That could be arranged, but what is the point, gentlemen? We have you now. Look behind you."

They looked.

In the doorway through which they had entered the small room there were a horde of shaggy-haired creatures whose eyes seemed to glow in the dark.

"Take them!" the voice commanded.

Illya and Solo raised their weapons. There was a puff of smoke that instantly filled the room. Then all went black.

* * *

AT FIRST both Solo and Illya seemed to be having the same dream. A dream filled with a face of the Devil himself bathed in a red glow. Their most deadly Thrush enemies crowded behind the face of the Devil and fired at them. The Thrush agents were small, tiny, and the face of the laughing Devil filled their minds.

Then they became aware that they were seated on a damp floor, and the face of the Devil became the satanic face of Morlock The Great.

The magician was not alone. Behind him his deformed, shaggy-haired guards held very efficient-looking machine pistols.

"So, gentlemen, we meet at last. Ah, you have caused me a certain trouble. That little affair in Santa Carla was most inopportune. We had to move our location."

"You should have told us it would be inconvenient," Illya said.

The tiny magician laughed. "Bravado, gentlemen? I expected more from you. Your Mr. Morgan led me to admire U.N.C.L.E. Most resourceful, that one. No one else had ever penetrated out little fortress down here." Morlock looked at Dabori. "Not counting traitors, of course. Ah, Dabori, I was worried about you. Never enough hate for the healthy and handsome. No gall."

"I am not insane," Dabori said softly.

The brilliant eyes of the tiny magician flared as he looked again at the hunchback. Dabori did not flinch. He stared back at his former leader.

"Insane," Dabori said again, softly.

Morlock drew a deep breath, smiled. "It is always the excuse of the weak and faint-hearted. So you have thrown in with the doomed ones, very well. I have no more time to waste with any of you. I don't suppose you will tell me just how much you know, how much your organizations know of my plans."

"We won't," Solo said.

Morlock nodded his grotesquely enlarged head. "I thought not. Well, I leave you now. This prison, you note, is not within my shelter. After it is all over perhaps the death form above will not reach here for some hours, even days. You will have time to think about being almost alone as you die."

Morlock turned to go. Suddenly, Maxine Trent leaped up. None of them had been tied. The beautiful Thrush agent stepped toward Morlock. The shaggy-haired guards rushed forward. Maxine laughed.

"Don't be a fool, Morlock! You can't hope to succeed alone. But with that powder of yours, the powder that causes those men to fire at nothing, we in Thrush could help you gain the rule of the world!"

Morlock held his guards back. He smiled his sardonic smile at Maxine.

"Ah, Thrush! So, the lion and the wolf lie together against me? Thrush and U.N.C.L.E. I must be far more powerful than I even dreamed."

Maxine stepped closer to the magician. "Listen to me, Morlock. U.N.C.L.E. knows essentially nothing. I brought them here. Thrush can offer you real power, true mastery inside a perfect organization. U.N.C.L.E. has no idea of what your powder can do."

"And do you?" Morlock said coldly.

"We know that in our hands it would bring the world to its knees. Don't be a fool," Maxine said. "Why destroy the world when you can rule it by the threat of destruction? Why rule over a burned out cinder? Bring them under your thumb. Only Thrush can help you. With that powder we can destroy all their defenses, take over, rule—"

Morlock's eyes flashed insanely. "They will die! All of them, the beautiful and the healthy. All the pigs who glory in the arrogance of their normalcy! We! We deformed and cast out will rule! We are the future! Our Brotherhood!"

Dabori struggled to his feet. In the pain of his twisted body the hunchbacks' voice was loud and clear.

"No! The sane do not envy. Our bodies may be twisted, but we do not wallow in self-pity! We face the world as what we are—men! Only an insane few hate as you hate.!

"You can lead, join Thrush!"

"Enough!" Morlock thundered. The grotesque magician sneered at Maxine. "So beautiful and so doomed! I will deal with no one, work with no one. Thrush is no better than U.N.C.L.E. you will all be destroyed!"

With a curse, Maxine suddenly bent and tore off her left shoe. She leaped toward Morlock. The rubber lift, and a sheath of leather, came away from her spike heel and a thin metal blade gleamed.

The Morlock guards tried to aim their weapons. But Maxine had Morlock himself between her and the guards. The guards milled. Morlock shouted. Maxine cursed. Illya and Solo leaped to their feet. Dabori grappled with a guard.

In the wild melee, Maxine nearly reached Morlock. But a guard caught her arm and she slashed at him. Her sharpened heel stabbed into the guard, who screamed. But he had saved Morlock. Other guards forced Maxine down.

At the instant Maxine was stopped, Illya suddenly hurled himself forward and tackled Morlock around the ankles. The small Russian made no further attempt to attack. On the ground, with Morlock also on the ground in front of him, Illya smiled.

"She almost got you. I'd rather save you for an insane asylum," Illya said.

Morlock struggled up. His guards herded them all back now. The macabre magician stared down at Illya.

"So, you saved me from her? I thank you, but it will not help you. Tie them up! They cannot escape, but let us not take any further chances with them."

The guards roughly tied up the four. Then the damp stone room was empty. In the silence Maxine breathed heavily. The beautiful Thrush agent glared at them all.

"You could have helped me, you idiots! Now look at us!"

Solo laughed. "Helping you, Maxine, is a dangerous game. No, Morlock or Thrush, that's no choice."

"Do you have any other choices?" Maxine screamed.

"Well," Solo said, "perhaps we do."

And he showed his fee hands to them all. In one hand was a tiny razor in the shape of a fingernail. His ropes were neatly cut through.

THREE

IN THE silence of the slim room, Solo stood up and bent to use his fingernail razor on the ropes that bound his feet. Then he freed Illya and Dabori. He replaced the innocent seeming fingernail-razor in his pocket.

"They tied us up too fast. Usually they would see the razor, but I thought they might miss it this time," Solo said.

"I always said you can think very well at times," Illya said.

"Thank you," Solo said.

"My pleasure," Illya said. "But what do we do now?"

Solo looked around the dark room. "Well, I would say we find a way out."

Dabori limped slowly around the walls. "If we can escape from this room, I think I can get us out. But I do not know this particular room. I must find

my bearings."

"Then we better get out of this room," Solo said.

"That seems reasonable," Illya said. "What do we have?"

"Well, they left me the heat foil," Solo said.

Illya shook his head. "There isn't a door, just a stone slab. This is an ancient room. What about explosives?"

"I've got my belt," Solo said. "But if we blow the door, we don't know who is outside. It won't do us any good to blow out and walk right into their hands."

"Then we better get them into the room," Illya said.

"Perhaps some smoke?" Solo suggested.

"That might work. They don't care about us, but it could make them curious, Napoleon," Illya agreed.

"Smoke then," Solo said, "and a small explosion. Let's have your cuff-link. You better keep the other, and I've got mine."

Illya removed one of his tiny cuff-link bombs and handed it to Solo. The agent took the bomb and set it as far away from the stone slab entrance as possible. Then he crossed the room to the slab and bent down. He felt in front of the crack beneath the slab.

"Draft blowing out," Solo said. "It should work. When I drop the smoke bomb everyone start yelling as loud as he can. Illya, you get ready to set off the bomb when they come in."

"Check," Illya said.

Illya went to the small cuff-link bomb. Solo stepped back from the stone entrance slab. He looked around once to be sure all was ready, then pulled

off his tie clip and hurled it to the floor directly in front of the slab.

A thick cloud of smoke billowed up instantly in front of the stone slab. In the dark dungeon Solo, Illya and Dabori began to shout, yelling, as if in frantic panic.

For a moment nothing happened. The thick smoke choked them as they shouted, but the draft from the old dungeon was sucking the smoke under the slab.

Then there was noise outside, and the slab began to swing inward. Four armed guards ran through the opening into the slimy dungeon.

Illya set off the tiny cuff-link bomb.

The explosion rocked the ancient stone room. Two of the *morlocks* fell, blown down by the explosion as the limped in. Solo grappled with the third, and Dabori leaped on the fourth.

Solo chopped down his *morlock* with a single karate blow to the throat.

The hunchback wrestled his man to the floor. The *morlock* attempted to use his machine pistol. Dabori wrested it from him and smashed the *morlock* across the head. The *morlock* lay still. Dabori stood up.

"Quick!" Solo cried. "Get their weapons and let's go!"

Illya, Solo and Dabori scooped up the four pistols. Solo carried two weapons. The three men dashed for the open stone slab. Two more *morlocks* appeared in the opening. In complete silence, Solo and Illya leaped on them and clubbed them down with the machine pistols.

No more *morlocks* came.

"Which way?" Solo said.

Dabori peered out through the opening. The eyes of the hunchback glistened.

"Left! I recognize the corridor."

"Now," Illya said, "before more guards come."

The three men stepped into the opening. Behind them there was a loud swearing. Maxine Trent, where she was still tied like a bundle, swore at them.

"Cut me loose, damn you!" Maxine shouted.

Solo turned, grinned. "Sorry Maxine dear. You didn't turn out to be a very helpful partner. I think you'll be cosy right where you are."

Maxine squirmed in her bonds. "Napoleon! You wouldn't!"

"But I would," Solo grinned. "Have patience. We'll probably be back for you."

"Napoleon!" Maxine screamed. "Damn you! I'll kill you for this! I'll—"

The beautiful Thrush agent squirmed in her bonds, cursed, flopped on the floor like a furious seal. Solo laughed as he went out through the opening into the dim light of the corridor. He followed Illya and Dabori along the corridor at a slow trot, the hunchback limping valiantly to keep the pace.

Behind them Maxine's curses echoed like the wail of an outraged banshee.

FOUR

THE THREE men moved as fast as Dabori could trot. The hunchback led them down the new corridors with the softly purring air vents. Again they saw no guards, but this time they could hear noise and voices somewhere in the distance toward where the long dining room was.

"It is a conference," Dabori said. "That is where they meet. And that is why we have met no guards."

"How much farther before we can get out of the new part?" Solo said.

"Not far, but they will discover our escape at any—"

The sudden clanging of the alarms drowned the next words of the hunchback. Their escape had been discovered.

They began to run, Solo helping Dabori along the dim corridors. Two *morlocks* appeared from a side corridor. Solo and Illya fired at the same instant. The *morlocks* went down.

They jumped over the fallen enemy and ran on; no more need for care or silence.

But the search for them was at the other end of the secret shelter. Once they heard the boom of Morlock The Great's voice from the distance, urging his men to find them, but they saw no more guards before they reached another door that led into the old dungeons and the sewer.

Dabori had a key to this door, too.

"I think they will be watching the other way," Dabori said. "They do not know about this way."

The door led into a storeroom piled with food for the survival of the *morlocks*, and, across the room, behind giant cases of canned water, Dabori indicated a loose stone in the wall. Together they pulled it out, crawled through, and replaced the stone.

They were in another low room that had not been seen by human eyes for centuries. The dust lay a foot deep on the stone floor. Dabori pointed to the far end where there was a low archway. They went through the archway and down a circular stone staircase. At the bottom there was the last door.

Solo burned the door open and they emerged again in the sewers of London. Ten minutes later they came out into the mud at the edge of the river. The Thames stretched dark in the night. Together, the three climbed up the embankment to dry land.

"We must get the police!" Dabori said.

Illya shook his head. "No time now. With us loose, Morlock will move even faster. We don't know what he plans or where it will happen."

Dabori was desperate. "But what can we do then? We must do something. We are out, but.. ."

Solo smiled in the night. "We follow Morlock, right, Illya?"

Dabori blinked under his mop of shaggy *morlock* hair. "Follow? But how —"

"I think Illya has arranged that, eh, Illya?" Solo said.

"Of course," the small Russian said. "Come on."

Illya led them through the streets and past the now dark and silent pub with its blazoned sign, *The End Of The World*. When they reached a building a block past the public house, Illya stopped and looked at Solo.

"There?" Illya said.

His hand pointed to one of the ruins still left from the second world war. It had been a church, and was now only rubble and jagged walls against the night sky. Solo nodded.

"By distance from the river, and general location, that should be right above the Cult shelter," Solo agreed.

"It would be just the place they would pick," Illya said. "I don't imagine anyone in the whole city knows what is down there. And we don't have any time to waste, do we? Napoleon, you better get us a helicopter, and quite fast. I'm getting a signal!"

In the hands of Illya Kuryakin a miniature gauge had appeared. Paul Dabori looked at the gauge, and at Illya. The gauge had a white dial with black

numbers and a black pointer. Closed, it seemed no more than a cigarette lighter, and there was a small receptacle attached that was empty now.

Illya smiled. "When I tackled Morlock, I managed to plant the sensor on his trouser leg. A radioactive sensor. This gauge picks it up as far away as fifteen miles. You see, we don't know where he is going, so I thought we would probably have to follow him."

"The gauge is moving!" Dabori said.

"Yes," Illya said. "Morlock is coming out."

Bent over his ring transmitter-receiver, Solo called for help. "London Control, this is Sonny. Come in, London Control. Sonny and Bubba, Mayday. Come in, London Control!"

The ring seemed to speak. "London Control. Go ahead, Sonny."

"Request helicopter. Repeat. Request helicopter immediately," and Solo gave the location.

"Helicopter at the river near *The End Of The World*. Roger, Sonny. Helicopter already in area; will be there in two minutes!"

"Over and out," Solo said.

Illya watched his gauge. "He's out!"

The three men ducked down in the shelter of a doorway. From the ruins of the church across the street four men appeared as if by magic. Three were *morlocks*, armed and wary, and the fourth was Morlock The Great himself. The four walked quickly to a long black car that suddenly glided down the street.

Solo pointed upward. "There!"

The helicopter circled the area, keeping well away until the black car had pulled away and vanished toward the west. Then the helicopter swooped

down toward the river. Illya, Solo and Dabori hurried down the dark city street to the river. The helicopter floated on the river.

"Paul," Illya said to Dabori, "this time you must stay here. Watch the old church until we get back."

Dabori nodded. The hunchback stepped back and smiled at Illya and Solo as the two agents waded through the mud and swam to the helicopter. Aboard, the helicopter lifted off at once.

"Where to?" the pilot said.

Illya looked at his gauge. "West, about fifty miles an hour, make a zigzag and stay ten miles back. I'll guide you."

"Roger," the pilot said.

The helicopter swung off to the west across the great city. Illya and Solo bent close over the gauge that tracked Morlock The Great.

ACT IV: NOT WITH A BANG BUT A SCREAM

THROUGH THE dark English night the chase continued. Hours had passed and still the dial of Illya's gauge showed Morlock and his men driving west. The car, some ten miles ahead, was driving fast. In the helicopter, by the light of the instrument panel, Solo and Illya bent over a map.

"He's heading in the general direction of his Salisbury house," Solo said.

"Where he most surely has another atom bomb shelter," Illya pointed out.

"But how does he plan to start a war out here?" Solo said.

"The naval base at Portsmouth?" Illya said.

"Not near enough."

"Some installation at Southampton?"

"Possibly, but—" Solo began.

"He's turning off!" Illya said, his eyes on his gauge.

The dial on the gauge indicated that Morlock The Great had turned his car and was not heading sharply north. The pilot swung the helicopter in pursuit.

The first faint grey of dawn was just tinging the eastern sky when the pilot suddenly spoke.

"You say he's out to start a war?" the pilot said.

"We think so," Illya said.

"Then I think I know where he's going," the pilot said. "on your map. You see the town of Colingbrane?"

"Yes," Illya said.

"Well, it won't show on your map, but there's an IRBM missile base at Colingbrane. According to our information, the missiles are hot, are aimed at major Soviet cities!"

"Then that's it!" Solo said. "How close is Morlock?"

"A few miles from the town," Illya said, looking at both his gauge and the map.

"But how does he figure on starting anything?" the pilot said. "Those missiles don't go without a call on the hot line from the top. The base has world-wide communications and missile tracking. They can't be surprised, and they can't fire without clearance from the top. Only the general has control of the firing button."

"Foolproof?" Illya said, his voice a question.

"I'd say so," the pilot said.

"No," Illya said. "Nothing is foolproof, because there are always fools. In everything there must be a human element, no matter how small, and what one human can make almost perfect, another can always destroy by locating the tiniest flaw."

"Well—" the pilot began.

"Illya!" Solo warned, pointed down to the gauge in the blond Russian's hand.

The gauge showed that Morlock had stopped. The helicopter was closing in rapidly.

"Set down right on top of them!" Illya snapped.

The two agents prepared their weapons, leaned out the windows of the lowering helicopter. A very faint grey light revealed the black car parked

below at the edge of a high fence. Beyond the fence there was nothing but houses and trees and small hills.

But the trained eyes of Solo and Illya saw that the houses inside the high fences were not houses. The trees were newly planted. The small hills were not hills but mounds covered with sod.

That was all they had time to see. As the helicopter swooped down, hovered over the car, *morlocks* came out into the open. Exposed, in the open, and stupidly fearless, they raised their weapons to fire.

They never fired.

Illya leaned out of the copter, dropped a small cylinder that exploded with a silent puff. The gas spread incredibly fast, and the *morlocks* slumped to the earth, asleep.

"Set us down," Illya said to the pilot.

The helicopter touched down just outside the fence. The fence, the two agents knew, would be electrified. They took their tools and weapons and turned to run toward the fence.

Solo instructed the pilot. "They'll have picked you up on their radar. Take off, but stay around. Let them catch you a mile or so away. Don't talk for a half an hour; that should give us time. If it doesn't, it won't matter by then."

"You are so encouraging, Napoleon," Illya said.

"A realist, my Russian friend. Come on."

The helicopter took off. Already they could see two jet fighters approaching high in the dawn sky. Solo and Illya, hidden in the grass, watched as the jets swooped in and forced the copter to land again a mile away.

Then they moved off along the fence.

The base was a friendly base, and the soldiers on guard would be their soldiers, but the soldiers would not know this, and the two U.N.C.L.E. agents did not have time to convince them. At the fence they went to work.

The fence was electrified and wired for alarm. Swiftly they attached special circuit loops to the wires they planned to cut so that no circuit would be broken. Then they shunted off the wires they would cut. Using insulated cutters and gloves, they cut just two wires, and squeezed through without touching the fence again.

Inside, they moved at a trot through the dawn light. The gauge in Illya's hand led them unerringly across the missile base, among the camouflaged silos, toward wherever Morlock The Great was working his deadly plan.

Twice they had to shoot guards with their sleep darts. The soldiers fell without a sound and the two agents moved on. The gauge led them directly to what looked like a simple English country house. There were two guards at the door. Illya and Solo crept closer.

The two guards did not move. They were dead.

"Morlock," Illya said.

"Yes, and that means he's inside," Solo said.

Without saying any more to show their thoughts that even now they could be too late, Illya and Solo entered the building and moved along the dim dawn hallways. They found deserted offices, empty halls, silent rooms.

"Even at dawn the base should be active," Illya said.

"Below?" Solo said. "That's where the control would be."

"And where Morlock is," Illya said, pointing to his gauge.

They followed the gauge until they located the heavy door that led down into the bowels of the earth where the heart of the missile base would be.

The door was locked. It was an extra-heavy door, made of some strong metal. Illya Kuryakin and Napoleon Solo looked at each other.

"Alloy steel, from the look of it," Solo said.

"Will our thermite melt it?" Illya said.

"I don't know. We may have to blow it."

"Try the thermite. We can't warn Morlock," Illya said.

Solo pressed the foil to the door over the lock, pulled the metal fuse. The white-hot glow filled the dawn hallway.

When the foil burned out there was a hole, but the door was still locked.

"Again," Illya said.

The second foil glowed in the dim dawn light of the silent corridor. The hole in the alloy steel door grew deeper, wider, and, then, was through. The door swung silently open.

Illya and Solo faced a small antechamber—and a second door!

"Elevator," Illya said.

"But there has to be a stair also," Solo said. "They wouldn't have only one way down. Electrical systems can fail."

"There," Illya pointed to a flat panel that had a button beside it, an emergency stairway.

This door was much thinner and the thermite bit through with dispatch. The door opened and Illya and Solo plunged quickly down a narrow, winding staircase. At the bottom there was another steel door—but this door was open!

They went through and found themselves on a kind of balcony—a circular gallery that ran around the walls above a large room. They looked over the edge at the room below.

The sight that met their eyes made them stare in horror.

TWO

MASKS!" ILLYA barked.

The two agents quickly put on the small gas masks they carried for just such an emergency. Wearing the masks, they peered down at the scene on the floor below.

The room was the central control of the IRBM missile base. A giant illuminated plastic map covered the far end of the room. The most sophisticated tracking instruments lined the left wall—radar, DEW Line relays, telemetric relays from all across the world. A long table filled the center of the room. A row of telephones was at the right—the red telephone standing out like some malignant monster.

But it was not the room itself that chilled the U.N.C.L.E. agents. It was the men in the room—the frantic men.

At the giant map enlisted men with long pointers were tracking the moving lights that indicated the incoming enemy missiles detected by the tracking instruments. The men at the map were wild with excitement, shouting, screaming out the progress of the enemy. A mad, wild excitement mixed with a thick odor of fear.

At the tracking instruments the operators were equally excited, calling out the blips on the radar, relaying the messages of the reports from across the world. The enemy missiles were pouring in all over the world, were being tracked by the radar in the room, by the radar at other installations, by the Distant Early Warning line far up in Canada. The operators on the machines shouted their progress in mounting panic.

"A thousand miles!"

"Nine hundred!"

"Closing in on England now—five hundred miles!"

"Closing on Washington!"

"Four hundred miles!"

At the long table officers, pale and anxious, sat with their portfolios open, staring at the map and at the radar alternately like the audience at a tennis match.

There was fear on their faces, but there was also determination. Clear on the faces of all the officers was the absolute determination that, destroyed though they would be, they would do their final duty and take the enemy to destruction with them.

And at the red telephone there was one man. A man with a greater look of determination on his face than any one else in the madhouse of the room. A man wearing the uniform of a general. A man with his hand on the red telephone.

A man who, as Illya and Solo watched, heard the telephone ring.

There was a silence, sudden as death, in the control room.

The general picked up the red telephone.

"Yes sir. I know, sir. In five minutes they'll know what they started."

The general lowered the red telephone and turned to face the room, where the men at the map still followed the progress of the incoming missiles, where the radar men tracked the enemy, where the communications men received the reports from the rest of the world, where officers waited for the command to fire their own missiles.

Only—

There were no lights moving on the giant map.

There were no blips on the radar screens.

There were no messages on the instruments relaying form other bases.

The red telephone had not rung.

In the room, Illya and Solo saw, only the men were active, were moving—the instruments and the map were dark and silent.

And, unseen in a distant corner, was the small black-cloaked, satanic figure of Morlock The Great!

In the air was the diabolical powder thrown by the insane magician.

In the silent room nothing happened, but the men in the room, frantic, saw it all happening in some giant hallucination.

The general walked to the red button that would fire all his missiles into the heart of the Soviet Union.

The general took his key from his pocket to unlock the red fire button.

Illya and Solo saw that there was no time to bring the frantic soldiers from the nightmare. Taking careful aim, they both fired at once.

The sleep darts struck the general, who gasped once and collapsed on the floor.

An officer, seeing the general fall, ran forward and reached for the key.

Solo shot him in the neck. He collapsed, asleep.

In the room pandemonium broke loose.

Morlock The Great, crouched in his corner, was cursing, firing at the two agents now. Illya tossed a sleep-gas cylinder, and another. The gas filled the room.

Men fell all across the room.

One more officer made a frantic last attempt to unlock the red fire button—and fell to the floor before he could.

In the room there was now complete silence.

The men all slept.

The machines that had been silent were still silent.

The red fire button was still locked, and the red telephone stood silent.

Illya and Solo stood up on the balcony. It was over. There would be no atomic war today. But tomorrow?

"Where is he?" Solo said.

They both looked to where Morlock The Great had been firing at them. The spot was empty now. Behind the place, in the steel walls, a door stood open, a door into a black hole.

"The elevator!" Illya cried. "He was standing at the elevator. He got away!"

"Then we better get him!" Solo said.

Illya pulled out his tracking gauge. The dial showed that Morlock The Great was above them somewhere, above and moving away.

The two agents did not wait to explain to the general or his men. That could wait. When the general and his men woke up, the effects of the diabolical powder would have worn off. Then there would be time for explanations.

Now Illya and Solo had a man to catch. They raced back up the stairs and out into the bright sun of morning.

THREE

THE MISSILE base was still quiet and undisturbed. All the action below had not ruffled the surface. But already men were moving, the day shift getting ready to take over the endless job of doing nothing but wait for a disaster that, if it happened, none would be likely to survive. An endless, terrible job, where a man could not even hope for action since, when action came, it would be the end.

Illya and Solo moved as swiftly as they could and still remain unseen. They checked the dial on their tracking gauge and saw that Morlock was apparently heading straight back to his car. The magician seemed to need no help, could move unseen wherever he wished. Illya and Solo trotted toward the same spot.

Then they were seen!

But the soldiers who converged on them did not fire. It was clear at once that the soldiers knew who they were, and that they were friends.

A jeep raced up. In it was the helicopter pilot and four officers.

"The jet guys forced me down. I got a going over, but I finally convinced these boys to call 'Washington direct and we're all cleared. What happened."

Illya and Solo explained. Two of the officers ran off toward the control center. The other two waited. Illya checked his gauge.

"He's in his car, moving away fast. Come on; we'll have to borrow the jeep."

The two officers, armed, the pilot, and Illya and Solo, roared off in the jeep. The gauge of the tracking instrument showed Morlock moving fast, about

four miles ahead. They passed where the black car had been. The four *morlocks* still lay asleep.

"He's heading for his house," solo said as he looked at the tracking gauge.

"Then we had better get there with him," Illya said.

But they did not make it. At the old gothic house five miles from Salisbury the car was parked, but there was no sign of Morlock The Great. Solo looked at Illya.

"Below? In the shelter?"

Illya shook his head, studied his dial. "No. The gauge shows that he is over there, to the left about a mile."

They all turned to look. The land was flat in that direction, and there was nothing in sight. Not a house, not a trace of a human being.

"The gauge is working. He has to be out there."

"Let's find out, then," Solo said.

The five men moved at a fast walk out toward where the gauge said they would find Morlock The Great. When they were still a half a mile from the spot, a small aircraft appeared on the flat land. Its motor was running. Before the five men could run to the spot, the small plane raced down its runway and rose into the air. Illya looked at his gauge. It showed that Morlock was in the plane.

"He's gone," Illya said.

Solo bent over his ring radio. "London Control! Come in, London Control, Sonny here. Code One!"

Instantly the ring answered. "London Control, Code One, all facilities alert."

"Morlock The Great escaped in a light plane. No destination known, but probably London. Notify police, Interpol, and organize an intercept. Alert Mr. Waverly in New York. Sonny and Bubba returning to London."

Solo clicked off, and the five men returned to the jeep. A half an hour later they were in the helicopter again, flying toward London.

* * *

IN THE RARE London sunny day, Solo and Illya approached the ruined old church that stood above the underground complex of the Cult. The tracking gauge in Illya's hand showed that, somewhere far below, Morlock The Great was still in the city. Solo looked for their friend, Paul Dabori. The hunchback was not in sight.

"He should have been here," Solo said.

"Yes, but we have more important problems," Illya said. The blond Russian nodded towards the ruins of the church. "There is something odd over there."

Illya led the way across the street and into the ruins of the old church. There was a clear space in the rubble that had not been there before. Somehow, the rubble itself seemed to have moved.

"The rubble was camouflage," Illya said. "Real rubble and bricks on a movable platform."

In the center of the clear space that had not been there before, a large slab of stone lay heavy and flat. The altar stone, but not where it had been. Where it had been was now a gaping hole in the earth.

"The stone was under the rubble," Solo said.

"It must work electronically. Much too heavy to be moved any other way."

The two agents surveyed the hole in the ground that led downward—a flight of narrow stone steps.

"This they didn't build," Illya said. "It's an old hideaway, built under the altar."

Solo took a breath. "Well, he's down there. Shall we wait for Mr. Waverly and help?"

"We missed him at Salisbury. I don't think we have time to wait," Illya said.

Solo checked his Special. "Let's go then."

The two agents started down the stairs into the ancient hideaway under the altar.

At first it was pitch dark. Then, as their eyes became accustomed, they saw that they were indeed in a very old stone room. They followed the homing signal to a blank wall. Solo felt carefully around. Four feet from the floor there was a tiny projection. The projection was metal and not at all ancient.

Solo pulled it. The wall slid silently open. The two agents looked at a shaft. Illya peered over the edge. Far below there seemed to be a dark object. Cables ran down the shaft.

"Elevator, at the bottom," Illya said.

"If we bring it up we'll alert them," Solo said.

"Then I expect we shall have to go down to it," Illya said.

With no more words, Kuryakin swung out on the cables and began to slide down. Solo followed. The two men slid carefully, breaking themselves to prevent their hands being burned raw by friction.

At the bottom they crouched on the top of the elevator car. Silently, Illya opened the roof hatch. The car below was empty. They lowered themselves

in and pressed the open button. A long, darkened corridor stretched before them. One of the new concrete bomb shelter corridors.

Once again, all was silent.

They left the elevator and moved along the dim corridor. The forced air vents hummed above their heads. Illya watched his gauge, letting it lead them closer and closer to Morlock The Great.

"The left corridor," Illya said.

They turned down the left corridor.

"Now right," Illya said.

It was at the end of this right corridor that they first heard the sound. A distant rumbling like a powerful engine, and, below the rumbling a sound like the sea far off on a stormy day. Solo held up his hand. They both listened.

"What do you think it is?" Illya said.

"A motor, real powerful motors, and—" Solo said.

"And voices, a lot of voices!"

Solo nodded. The rumbling of motors, and the sound that was many voices, came no closer. But even as they listened in the dim corridor, two *morlocks* suddenly appeared from a door in the wall in front of them.

The *morlocks*, hurrying, and the two agents saw each other at the same time.

The *morlocks* were too slow.

Illya and Solo stepped over their bodies and went on down the corridor. They had used sleep darts and there had been no sound. But Illya stopped, looking at his gauge.

"We're going away!"

Kuryakin turned and retraced his steps. When he reached the door the two *morlocks* had come from he stopped again. He pointed at the door.

"In there, Napoleon. But not close."

Solo stepped past and opened the door.

A narrower, brighter corridor led downward at a sharp slant. As the two agents moved silently along this different-looking passage, the sound of engines and voices grew louder. The two agents nodded to each other. At least it was becoming clear that they were going in the right direction.

"From the sound of it," Solo whispered, "they may all be up ahead."

"We'll need the sleep-gas bombs again," Illya said.

"And a little luck. 'Dabori said there could be a hundred," Solo said.

The passage continued downward. A chill grew in the draft of air that was now coming along the passage.

"This passage connects to outside!" Solo said.

"Morlock would have an escape route, Napoleon," Illya said.

The voices seemed very close now, and the throb of powerful engines. Then, suddenly, Illya stopped again. He stared down at his gauge.

"We've passed him again," Illya said.

The blond agent returned up the passage and stopped at a spot where there was nothing at all—blank wall on either side, and smooth floor and ceiling. Illya narrowed his eyes and began to feel the walls.

"Here!" Illya whispered. "Be ready! The gauge says he's very close, right behind this wall. I feel a lever."

Illya pulled the lever and a wall slid open. A very narrow opening, and on the other side only darkness. The two agents peered in.

The shouts came loud from the end of the main passage. From both ends of the passage, the *morlocks* were roaring in fury and rushing toward them. There was no time to hesitate.

"Inside!" Illya cried.

The two agents dashed through the small opening in the side wall—and stepped out into space.

With cries of surprise, Illya and Solo fell down through the pitch dark.

FOUR

STUNNED, the two agents lay on what seemed to be a dirt floor. Nothing moved in the dark. The only sound was the sound of motors not far away, and the rumbling sound of *morlock* voices.

Solo was the first to revive. He sat up and switched on his miniature ring-flashlight. They were, he saw, in a deep pit. The floor was dirt, but the sides were stone. Above, far above, the ceiling was stone, and halfway up was the black shape of the opening they had been so cleverly forced through.

Illya's voice spoke beside Solo. "Look!"

"What?"

"Shine it left, on the floor," Illya said.

Solo shined the light. In the center of the pit-like room where they lay on the dirt there was a small metal pillar, like a receptacle for burning incense.

It stood only two feet high and had a flat top. On the flat top was a tiny object.

The two men looked at the object.

"The homer," Illya said. "It's the device I attached to Morlock The Great's cuff."

There was a loud, mocking laugh.

It came from above, from the opposite side of the pit from where they had plunged down. Solo shone his lights up. As he did so light flooded the entire pit from spotlights up in the ceiling. The two agents blinked in the bright glare.

The sardonic laugh came again.

On a wide ledge halfway up the sheer stone walls they saw once again the tiny, grotesque figure of Morlock The Great. The magician stared down at them.

"You did very well, gentlemen. I underestimated you badly. But, then, you now have underestimated me. I admit I was stupid to let your plant that device on me, but you were stupid to think that I would not detect it in the end. So, now here we are."

"And without an atomic war," Solo pointed out.

Morlock laughed, his over-large head shaking on his skinny midget body. "True. I failed this time. But I have you. I will not fail next time, but for you two I fear there will be no next time. I do not intend to make the same error again—the error of leaving you alive behind me, I mean."

"We are not alone," Illya said coldly.

"U.N.C.L.E. ? Yes, they will send more men, but I think you two are the most dangerous. The others I can handle," Morlock said. "I am in no hurry, really. We are all prepared, the shelters are ready. All that has happened is that we have lost our good London shelter, and—"

"Don't be stupid, Morlock," Solo said. "You're known, and so is your plan. Every government will be after you. You won't be able—"

"So," Morlock said, "you have reported. Unfortunate. Still, it is not as bad as you hope. I'm sorry to tell you. They will not find me, and we will start again."

"Where can you hide now?" Illya said, mocked.

The grotesque figure on the ledge only laughed his sardonic laugh.

"Ah, gentlemen, where I can hide is my secret. But I admit freely, that you have caused me much trouble. Yes, much trouble. I will not let you off lightly. So, *Voila!*"

The grotesque magician waved his tiny hand. There was a puff of smoke on the floor and *morlocks* appeared as if from nowhere. Before Illya or Solo could move they were pinioned by strong hands, something was looped around one of each of their legs. Another flash of smoke, and the *morlocks* vanished.

"You must admire my tricks, gentlemen," Morlock said from his ledge. "I am the greatest magician."

Solo and Illya were too busy looking at what had been done to their legs. They looked at each other, puzzled. The *morlocks* had chained one leg of each of them—chained securely and on long chains that clanked when they moved. The *morlocks* had also removed all clothes but their underwear.

"Your clothes appear to be far too dangerous," Morlock said drily from his ledge. "Are the chains comfortable? As you see, you have quite free movement. So, now, *Ole!*"

And the tiny magician gestured again with his hand. There was another flash of flame and smoke, and the sound of water. Fast, inrushing water. Illya and Solo stood up. Water was gushing around their feet, pouring into the room.

On the ledge the insane little magician choked with demonic laughter. "A swim, eh? A nice swim. You are quite free to swim, to fight, until—But you

must have guessed, yes? Until the chains reach their limit!"

The water gushed up. It had reached their waists now. Illya bent, struggled with the chain on his leg. Solo watched the tiny magician laughing on his ledge.

"You can fight, you see? Ah, that is the pleasure! To watch you struggle, and you *will* struggle because you are alive! No simple drowning, not for you! You will swim, and thrash, and then the chain will hold you, the water will rise, and you will go under. When the water reaches my feet—your heads will go under and you will die! Die!"

The water rose higher and higher, and the two agents were swimming now. The chain on only one leg did not prevent them from swimming on the surface of the rising water.

Morlock roared with laughter on his ledge.

In the distance, suddenly, there was the sound of firing. Doors crashed. The voices of men reached their ears above the sound of inrushing water. On the ledge the monstrous little magician listened. He seemed to be estimating. His laughter was gone. He stared down at them from his glowing, satanic eyes.

"Your friends, but they will not be in time. My men will hold them until I escape, and by then you will be under the water."

The water rose swiftly. The two agents struggled to swim, to break the chains. Morlock leaned down toward them as they floated up toward his ledge.

"You destroyed my plans! You stopped me! I will win, but you have ruined it all for now! So you will die! You will all die and we outcast and spit-upon will inherit the Earth!"

Struggling, Solo and Illya looked at each other. Their heads were nearly up to the ledge. Each man could feel the chain reaching its end, dragging now

on their thrashing legs. Another few minutes and the chains would be fully extended—and then—

On the ledge the water lapped at the feet of Morlock The Great. The grotesque magician laughed once more.

"We will rule the earth!" Morlock cried, and once again his hand described an arc in the air. "Farewell, dead men, *Voila!*"

The tiny hand made its magic gesture.

There was a puff of bright red smoke, and—

A sheet of flame shot to the ceiling of the stone pit.

Inside the flames, his clothes a holocaust, Morlock The Great screamed and screamed.

There was the puff of smoke, and where there should have been nothing and no one, where Morlock The Great should have vanished in his puff of smoke—there was a great sheet of flame and the tiny magician, his eyes a mask of terror, turned into a human torch before the eyes of Solo and Illya struggling in the water.

With a final scream of horror and pain, Morlock The Great leaped into the water.

It did not help. The flames did not go out, and, on the surface, Morlock The Great burned like a torch.

Solo and Illya stared, struggled, fought to keep their heads above water.

Then they felt it—the water was receding.

On the ledge where Morlock The Great had played his last trick, they saw the twisted body, and gentle face, of Paul Dabori. The *morlock* who had come to their aid smiled down as they floated down with the receding water.

* * *

IN THE long conference room of the Cult shelter deep beneath the city of London, Solo and Illya sat in dry clothes and listened to the dry voice of Alexander Waverly. The chief was having difficulty lighting his pipe.

"You see, your friend Paul Dabori decided to slip back after you went off in chase of Morlock. It seems he decided that with all that hair he would not be recognized, especially after you all escaped."

Dabori smiled. "They never suspected I had come back down here. When Morlock came running back, there was much confusion. I followed him to his private room. When he wasn't looking, I replaced some of his special smoke powder with some of your heatfoil. I tore up the foil, and mixed it with his smoke powder. I'm afraid it fixed him."

Waverly managed to get his pipe alight. "So, when you gentlemen were, shall we say, at the end of your—uh—rope, Morlock could not resist one last disappearance, and set off his smoke act. Unfortunately, this time Dabori had mixed him something a little stronger than smoke. You saw the result, I believe."

"And I knew where the walves were for that pit," Dabori said.

Solo raised an eyebrow. "If you need work, I think we could use you, Mr. Dabori."

The hunchback shook his head. "No, I will return to my own work, I think. I want to live quietly, usefully now. Of course, first I will get a haircut!"

Solo laughed. Illya looked seriously at his Chief. Waverly, his bloodhound face impassive, puffed quietly on his pipe. All around them the London police were herding *morlocks* away.

"Did you get them all?" Illya said.

"We did. They had a submarine. That was the motors you heard. But they were still waiting for Morlock himself when we broke in. When they saw his body, all fight went out of them. I don't think we will have any more trouble with them. I'm afraid many of them will need mental care, though," Waverly said.

"And the powder? The powder that induced the hallucinations?" Illya said.

"We do have it all. We will analyze it, of course, but then it will be destroyed," Waverly said.

Suddenly, Solo jumped up. The chief agent looked all around the room. He seemed to be looking for someone.

"Maxine!" Solo said. "We forgot Maxine!"

Alexander Waverly studied his pipe. "No, we picked her up where you had left her."

"I'll bet she was annoyed," Solo grinned. "We have her?"

Waverly coughed. "Ah, no, I'm afraid she's slipped us again. A very resourceful woman. It seems she had a hidden hypodermic and knocked out our guards. She escaped, and with some of the hallucination powder. She —"

Illya sat up. "Thrush has a sample of that powder?"

A smile spilt Waverly's impassive face. "Yes and no. The Trent woman did escape with a sample. But, fortunately, I had taken the precaution of removing the real powder. I hope Thrush will not be too disappointed with their sample of the simple smoke powder Morlock liked to use, poor man."

Solo and Illya grinned at each other. Solo, his boyish face smiling, wondered just what Thrush would say after their experts ran exhaustive tests on what would turn out to be simple smoke powder.

Solo decided that Maxine would have a few bad moments. But Maxine Trent had a charmed life. Solo knew that he would see her again.

Illya Kuryakin was busy studying the records of the late, and very unlamented Morlock The Great.

The grotesque magician himself was a charred corpse in a tiny coffin on its way to the London morgue.

THE END

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[home](#)

posted 2.14.2010, transcribed by Iris